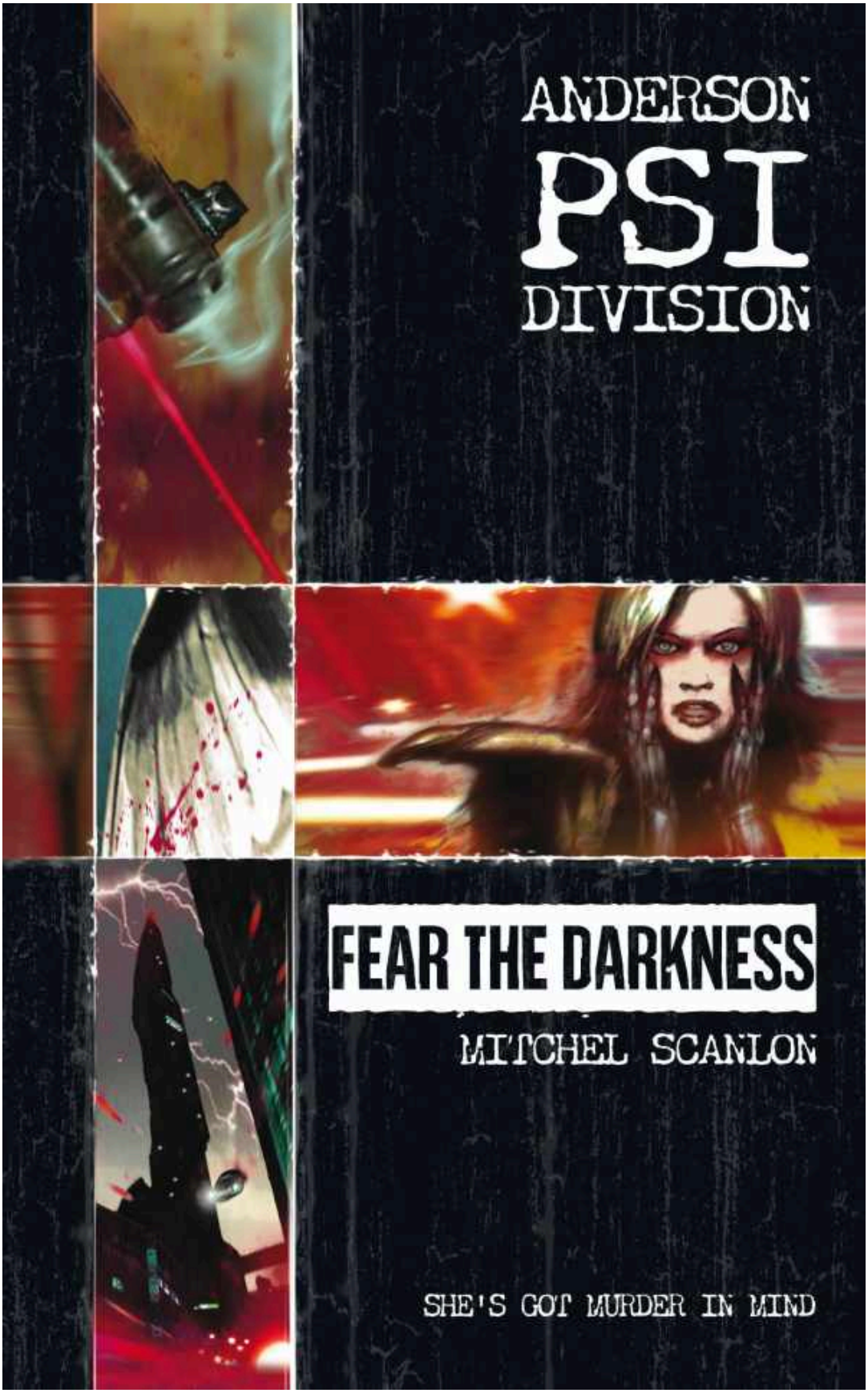
ANDERSON

PSI DIVISION

FEAR THE DARKNESS

MITCHEL SCANLON

SHE'S GOT MURDER IN MIND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FEAR THE DARKNESS
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SHE'S GOT MURDER IN MIND

Judge Anderson created by **John Wagner & Brian Bolland**.

To Marc - OK, so you thought the last one was all right. Hope you like this one.

A 2000 AD PUBLICATION

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ANDERSON PSI DIVISION

It is the year 2126. Atomic war has decimated humanity, and the world is a bleak wasteland, inhabited by mutants and freaks. Most people live in vast, walled cities that keep the lethal winds and foul inhabitants outside at bay; after all, the cities have enough problems of their own to deal with. Boredom is endemic, unemployment is sky high and so is the crime rate, as the cramped Meg citizens strive to survive any way they can. As the population booms and tensions rise, the authorities know that they must use an iron fist to keep the teeming millions in check.

In Mega-City One, home to four hundred million, the Law is king. Justice is upheld by the implacable Judges - empowered to act as judge, jury and executioner - and intent on sending criminals to jail or an early grave. But a new threat is emerging. Radioactivity slowly works its insidious voodoo on the population, warping not just flesh, but also minds. People with dangerous talents stalk the shadows: telekinetics, pyromaniacs, telepaths and psychos. Some seek to use their talents for criminal ends and others try to hide them, fearful of recrimination. Whatever the case, in the eyes of the Law, they are all criminals, and they need bringing in!

It is Psi Division's task to do what the regular Judges cannot: deal with supernatural phenomena and hunt mutant psychics down! Its ranks are comprised of powerful telepaths and psychics, able to scan minds and psychometrically "read" bodies and crime scenes. Foremost in this elite cadré is Psi-Judge Cassandra Anderson: sassy, dedicated and hard as nails. Psi-flashes enable her to sense danger and near future events and she can even read the minds of the recently deceased. In the fractious, urban nightmare of the future, she'll need all her talent and tenacity not just to uphold the Law, but to stay alive!

ANDERSON PSI DIVISION

FEAR THE DARKNESS

Mitchel Scanlon

PROLOGUE

TANGENTS IN THE DEATH OF MORRIS WEEMS

It was a Sunday night. The Sabbath night. All along Flynt Plaza the pole-dancing bars, porn-u-likes and eroto-palaces were open and ready for business. Entering through the southside entrance off Hefner Pedway, Morris Weems pushed his way through the bustling crowds thronging to and from the lurid neon-clad shop fronts lining the edges of the plaza. Rising above the general hubbub he heard scattered snatches of the patter of the street-callers and the blare of the loudspeakers shouting out their wares.

"Dream girls! Holo girls! Real girls! Live girls!" On and on they went, droning endless variations on the same salacious theme. "Girls with girls! Men with girls! Men with men! Girls who were men! Men who were girls! Every taste catered for; every customer satisfied!" Before he had walked a dozen steps, Morris felt sick to his stomach. He was a pious man who in the normal run of things would have kept his head bowed, carefully averting his eyes so as not to catch sight of anything that might offend him. But tonight was no ordinary night. Tonight, he had to steel himself for a greater task ahead.

Tonight, he needed to see the face of his enemy.

Gazing around him as he moved through the crowd, Morris saw the whole broad gamut of Mega-City life played out before him. He saw sniggering juves pausing to gawk in teenage hunger at the shifting images on the holo-display windows with their luring promises of vice. He saw wrinkled eldsters hobbling from one business to the next, comparing prices as they calculated which form of damnation best fit their budget. He saw women exposing themselves with flesh-flaunting microskirts and plunging necklines. Men, their faces distorted and made monstrous in the fluorescent glare of streetlights, their expressions running from the desperate to the hopeful. He saw followers of some of the city's bizarre and innumerable range of crazes: obese fatties, so corpulent through overindulgence they needed belliwheels to move about at all; the so-called "flower children", shamelessly naked except for the blooms and foliage sprouting from the seeds they had planted beneath their skin; and most sickening of all were the uglies, self-mutilating fashion victims whose outer repulsiveness only served to mask a deeper malaise of the spirit within. Morris stared into the

souls of his fellow citizens and saw sin in all its thousand nauseating shades. He saw corruption on every face and evil on every corner.

He saw a city beyond redemption, and he longed to see it burn.

Distracted by a glint of silver in the air above him, Morris looked up to see a Spy-in-the-Sky camera hovering directly overhead. He felt a momentary surge of panic, sure the machine had somehow read his thoughts, only for the robot flyer to rise once more to resume its surveillance of the crowd from elsewhere. Morris experienced a rush of relief; the eyes and ears of the Justice Department might well be everywhere, but they had no way of knowing what was in his heart. To all appearances he was no different from the thousand other citizens who milled around him - just another sinner, come to Flynt Plaza to wallow in the bitter seas of dissolution. With the relief there also came a familiar stab of anger at those he held most responsible for the cancer of sin that gripped this city.

The Judges had failed their people. As the self-appointed guardians of the Law, it was their duty to police morality. But despite a much-vaunted reputation for harshness, they seemed content to let depravity run rampant, allowing the city's smut-merchants and panderers to practise their trades with abandon. Flynt Plaza was only the most visible symptom of a more widespread and insidious disease. Sin was everywhere in Mega-City One. Morris saw it in the Tri-D game shows and the Megalot draws that encouraged avarice, in the celebrity-obsessed gossip-zines that promoted envy, in the unemployment payments that tempted the citizens to sloth. All about him he saw pride, gluttony, lust and wrath. He saw a city oozing sin from every pore. A stinking cesspool, ruled over by false Judges who refused to stem the ever-rising tide of filth. But, even in a city of the damned, Morris knew a single good man could make a difference. He knew he was that man, and tonight he would make his presence felt.

Stepping into a side alley just off the central plaza, Morris slowed his pace as he saw his target ahead of him: Blue Dreams Eroto-Palace, the winking neon sign read above the doorway. *You Want It - We Can Help You Dream It!* Pausing, he stood outside for a moment, eyes closed as he muttered a silent prayer. Upon opening them, he saw his reflection in the opaquely tinted plexiplast of the eroto-palace's windows. He saw the heavy black overcoat hanging stiffly from his shoulders, the outlines of his body under the coat seeming strangely broad in comparison to the gaunt features

of his face. A shiver ran through him and he was not sure whether it was in fear or anticipation. He felt a moment's doubt, but the memories of all he had just seen and heard in Flynt Plaza served to shore up his resolve. Gathering himself, he breathed deeply of the chill night air and exhaled it in a long cleansing breath before moving purposefully towards the door. His decision was made. He had a calling. Tonight, he would take the first steps in a war to purge this city of sin - a war of fire, blood and retribution.

Tonight, Morris Weems would make a stand.

With a sibilant hiss, the automatic doors slid open. Advancing inside the eroto-palace, Morris saw two long rows of padded tables on either side, leading to the other end of the room where a bored-looking fat man sat behind a counter. Half the tables were in use by sleeping customers, their faces hidden behind the grey plastic masks of dream-machine helmets while dozens of subsidiary wires trailed from their bodies to monitor their vital signs. From the first, Morris was struck by how quiet it was. Flynt Plaza was a cacophony of competing voices, but here there was only the hum of machines and the occasional moan from a contented dreamer.

"What'll it be?" the fat man said, barely looking up from the computer terminal in front of him as Morris approached the counter.

"I... This is my first time," he replied, unsure how best to proceed.

Sighing, the fat man tapped at his computer keyboard before turning the screen for Morris to see it.

"How about this one?" he said, indicating a scene of half-naked women frolicking suggestively among the azure waters of a tropical paradise. "*Beach Blanket Bimbos*. It's a popular one with first-timers."

"Uh, I'm not sure," Morris said awkwardly.

"*Hell City Hellions*?" the man said, pulling open a drawer behind the counter to reveal neat rows of labelled data-slugs. "*Sleazy School Girls? Boss Bitches A Go-Go? Wicked Nuns? Three Makes Fun?* You name the title, we've got it, and we can adapt them to your preferences."

"Adapt them?"

"I mean we can reshape the specifics of the dream scenario. Say you want to go with *Boss Bitches*, but you got a thing for the Mona Lisa or that hot little number who does the weather on Channel One-Seventy? We can put them in, no problem. Course, Mona Lisa's cheaper - you want the weather girl, there's royalties involved. Image rights, you see. You do it

with a celebrity, you got to pay extra, even in your dreams. But maybe you want something different? Something really special?"

"Special?" Morris asked, growing increasingly uncomfortable. "I'm not sure I know--"

"There's always something nobody's thought of," the fat man said with a shrug. "You want to dream about playing hide the carrot with a cartoon rabbit? We can do it for you. Although there's nothing really new about that one. Between you and me, it's surprisingly popular. Point I'm making is we can start from scratch, build the scenario however you want. Those made-to-measure jobs are pretty expensive though and this being your first time, you're probably better going off-the-peg."

Morris was stunned by all he had heard. It was even worse than he'd thought. As much as he had told himself to be prepared for anything once he stepped inside an eroto-palace, the wide vistas of sin on offer appalled him. He felt the urge to lash out, to gouge out the fat man's knowing eyes and wipe the disgusting half-smirk from his face, but he constrained himself. There was bound to be a panic button on the other side of the counter. He must bide his time and catch the fat man unawares. Tonight's work was too important to be compromised by a rash act.

"Maybe I'm coming at this from the wrong angle," the fat man said, mistaking Morris's silence for indecision. "Maybe you already know what you want, but you're too embarrassed to say it? You needn't worry, we get all sorts here. Look, you want to get it on with guys, pre-ops, animals? It's no skin off mine. Takes all kinds of freaks to keep the world on bouncing."

In the pocket of his overcoat, Morris carried two small but heavy energy cells in the knotted end of a sock. As he watched the fat man's face and tried to keep his own expression neutral, he felt his hand go to his pocket as though with a mind of its own. He felt it grip the club tightly, as he fought the overwhelming urge to strike.

"There is something," Morris said hoarsely, looking for an opening. "I have always been partial to inanimate objects..."

"Why didn't you say so?" the fat man said. "We've got them all. *School of Hard Rocks, The Glass is Half-Empty, If There Ain't No Wood It Ain't No Good.* Trust me, I think I got something here that's right up your alley."

Turning away, the fat man bent forward to unlock the lowest drawer beneath the counter. As he did, Morris noticed a palm-sized bald spot

peering out from amid the thinning hair at the back of the fat man's scalp. He noticed it, and was pleased. It made the perfect target.

He had been right to be careful. Stepping over the fat man's fallen body, Morris noticed the dull metal gleam of a small object sitting half-hidden on a shelf below the counter: a handgun, slim and semi-automatic, kept within easy reach in case of trouble. Morris cupped the gun in his hand for a moment as he wondered whether he should use the fat man's own weapon to finish him off. He decided against it. A bullet would be too quick and easy a death. Better to let him burn with the rest.

Slipping the gun into his trouser pocket, Morris retraced his steps back to the front door and locked and bolted it from the inside. He spared a glance at the dreamers around him. His fears were swiftly allayed. For all the noise he had made subduing the fat man - the crack as the cosh split his skull, the crash as his body fell to floor - none of the dreamers had woken up. Lost in the sleeping worlds of their own private damnations, they might as well have all been blind and deaf. Checking the timer displays on each dream-machine, Morris saw he had at least twenty more minutes before the next dream-session ended. Twenty minutes before the first of the sleepers would awaken.

Twenty minutes would be time enough to do what was needed.

Reaching inside his coat, Morris pulled out one of the litre-sized plasteen bottles he had hidden there earlier. He was carrying twelve bottles in all, held in Velcro loops concealed within the coat's inner lining and filled with a liquid incendiary gel he had created by mixing synthi-oil, paint thinner and household detergent. Finding the right proportions for the mixture had been the tricky part, but courtesy of three weeks of testing, he was confident it would do its work well enough. Three weeks out of the four months he had spent preparing since he had decided to make his stand. Months spent studying, making calculations, experimenting and obtaining ingredients.

He had needed to be cautious, mindful that a single slip or an instant's carelessness could bring the Judges to his door. It was only now, past the point of no return and with his crusade about to begin in earnest, that he realised the time he had spent in preparation for tonight had not been a matter of weeks, months, or even years. Unknowingly or not, it had all begun much longer ago than that. He had been preparing for this moment his entire life.

Taking the last of the bottles from inside his coat, Morris put it with the rest on top of one of the eroto-palace's unoccupied dream-tables. Retrieving a roll of electrical tape from his pocket, he fixed the bottles together in groups of three, arranging them in a tight circle on the table and leaving a small space in the centre. The circle complete, Morris stepped back to admire his handiwork and catch his breath. The firebomb was almost ready; all he had to do was add the explosives.

Inside his coat, the final piece lay waiting: a length of hollow plasteen tubing, capped at each end and packed tightly with a crystalline powder. Learning how to make a pipe bomb had proved to be even more of a challenge than mixing the incendiary - thanks to Mega-City One's strict anti-incitement laws, there had been no "how to" books or bomb manuals for him to rely on. Instead, Morris had been forced to turn to school texts on chemistry, physics and electronics, wading through endless reams of dry scientific theory in search of inspiration. Denied access to the exotic chemicals and more commonplace devices of bomb making, he had made do with creative alternatives. Skid-Away toilet cleaner, Coronary-Lite salt substitute and raw munce had combined to give him his explosive: a nine-volt energy cell, his wristwatch and some wires had given him his timer.

Placing the bomb in the space at the centre of the circle of bottles, Morris shrouded several turns of electrical tape around the outer circumference and pulled the whole thing tight. With a last look at the dreamers, he set the timer at the end of the pipe and pressed the button to activate it: five minutes and counting. More than enough time for him to leave the eroto-palace by the rear fire exit and be far away from the scene before the fire started. He had even brought a padlock and chain to lock the door behind him to prevent any of the sinners from escaping. Making his way back behind the counter, Morris mentally reviewed his preparations and was pleased to note how smoothly it had all gone.

Nothing could go wrong.

Tangents, Jard Kelso thought as he hurried through the crowds along Raymond Pedway on his way to Flynt Plaza. That's what the damned things are called.

It had been on the tip of his tongue all night - the vague memory of a word he had last heard in his school days more than twenty years ago, sitting bored and restless in trigonometry class while the robo-teacher

droned on and on about arcs and lines and angles. It was the word for intersecting lines that met only at a single point. Tangents. Back then, the word was as dull and irrelevant as everything else they had tried to drum into his head, but now, thanks to the benefit of twenty years of hindsight, Jard was glad he could remember it. It seemed the only word that could even come close to explaining his good fortune.

Catching a glimpse through the crowds of a juve gang loitering further down the pedway, Jard felt unease and tightened his grip on the strap of the satchel hanging from his shoulder. Careful to gaze straight ahead so as not to meet the juves' eyes, Jard tried to look nonchalant, only to see his fears were unfounded - lost in their own conversations, the juves barely glanced his way. Not for the first time that night, Jard forced himself to stay calm. There was no way anybody could know what he had in the satchel. To all appearances he was just another citizen out for an evening stroll. The fact he was carrying a fortune with him and was on his way to making the biggest score of his life was neither here nor there.

Like almost everything else in Jard's life, it had begun in a bar. Last night to be precise, when he had been sitting in his regular backroom booth at McGinty's Tavern, nursing a synthi-beer as he waited to see what business the night would bring him. Jard was a low-level fence and spent most of his nights there, dealing with the endless procession of has-beens, never-would-bes and wannabe big-timers who would come to McGinty's looking to sell the swag from their latest heists. Tap gangers, bat burglars, B&E men, walk-in artists - Jard had dealt with them all. With each customer he would go through the same song and dance, feigning a show of bored disinterest in whatever they were selling in order to drive down the price. It was the same old story, every night. Until yesterday, when a particularly sad-looking case walked into McGinty's and Jard realised his days of haggling with small-timers were over.

Tangents, he found himself thinking again, finding a strange sense of comfort as he repeated the word in his head. Tangents. That's what makes all the difference between being a rich man or just another hardworking schmuck who never gets a break.

Lincolm. That was what the sad case had called himself. Whether or not he was dumb enough to tell him his real name, Jard had no way of knowing. Not that he'd cared much either way. All he'd wanted to know was what kind of goods were on offer, and when Lincolm opened his bag and showed

what was for sale, Jard heard the ringing of cred-registers and knew he was looking at the kind of score most fences only ever saw in their dreams.

Gemstones. Fifteen of them, in different sizes, shapes and colours. Jard was no expert when it came to hot rocks, but he figured straight away he was looking at a couple of million credits' worth, easy. Just as he figured the guy Lincolm was probably even dumber than he looked. Dumb as shit and carrying two million in stolen goods. Yeah, it had been a dream score all right.

"They're paste," Jard had said, making a big show of taking out an eyeglass and inspecting each stone in turn. "Synthetics," he said, holding up a diamond and using it to scratch a groove in the plexiplast surface of the table between them. "See what I mean? Real diamonds aren't hard enough to cut plexiplast. Everybody knows that."

"Oh," Lincolm said, before trying to launch into his entire life story as though he hoped Jard might take pity on him. But Jard was not interested in hearing where the gems came from, or why Lincolm had stolen them. If his experience as a fence had taught him nothing else, it was that it was always better to conclude a deal quickly before a sucker could get wise. Besides, it was not as if he would believe Lincolm's story even if he heard it; thieves always lied - it went with the territory.

"I'll give you two hundred credits," Jard said, cutting Lincolm off in mid-flow. "I know a guy who deals in costume jewellery. He might give me something for them."

Of course, Lincolm had held out for more. Eventually, after a few minutes' hard bargaining, they had settled on a price of five hundred credits. With that, Lincolm walked out of McGinty's - no doubt congratulating himself on what a great haggler he was, and none the wiser he had just given away his only chance to ever make it rich. I was right, Jard thought as he watched the man go. As dumb as shit. I'm surprised the bastard's even smart enough to walk and eat a Gooey Bar at the same time.

With the gemstones in his satchel, Jard was on his way to Flynt Plaza for a meeting with a buyer. An hour more at most and he would have all he had ever dreamed of. Like most people, he found it hard to accept good fortune at face value. Which was why, even as he walked the pedway, the word "tangents" was still echoing through his head. To Jard, it seemed to explain everything. Lincolm, the gemstones, himself - they were all tangents: lines that had intersected for seemingly no better purpose than to make Jard

Kelso a wealthy man. As far as Jard was concerned, there could be no better purpose than that in the whole damned world.

Tangents, he thought with satisfaction, little realising that elsewhere in the night other tangents were already in motion and headed his way.

With the timer counting down, Morris knew the last place he should be standing was in the alleyway out back of the eroto-palace, waiting for the explosion. No matter how many times he told his legs to move, or reminded himself of the importance of being far away from the scene by the time the Judges arrived, he could not help it. He had planned for this moment for months and he wanted to see the show.

Everything is fine, he thought, glancing up and down the deserted alleyway. There is no one about, no one to see me. After the bomb goes off, they will all be too busy watching the eroto-palace burn to notice me leave. But try as he might to reassure himself, he knew he was lying. He was taking a dangerous chance and, for the first time, it occurred to him he had planned for everything but his emotions.

He tried to check the time, only to remember as he looked at his bare wrist that he had used his watch as part of the timer. Making a mental note to buy a new one tomorrow, he waited impatiently in the shadows, barely registering the chill of the air around him as he stared at the dark window of the eroto-palace. It can't be much longer, he told himself, aware how eager and excited he had become. The five minutes I set the timer for must nearly be up. Any second now.

When the moment came it was something of a disappointment. He heard the dull *whoomp* of the pipebomb exploding, but nothing else. Where he had expected chaos, flames and a sense of fulfilment, there was only a vague feeling of dissatisfaction. Despite the warning voice he heard in his head telling him he should run down the alley and not look back, Morris found he was moving in entirely the opposite direction. Unable to contain his curiosity, he walked closer to the eroto-palace and looked in through the window.

Inside, he could see the dark eddies of billowing smoke as they were lit by the red glow of the fires burning further within the building. He heard the first screams as the dreaming sinners inside awoke to damnation. Listening to the sound, Morris felt his heart quicken as a dizzying sense of exhilaration flowed through him. This was the moment he had longed for.

As always in his life, the ache of pleasure as the exhilaration ended brought with it dark feelings of shame. For once, though, Morris refused to allow that shame to claim him.

There is nothing of sin in this, he told himself. There is nothing wrong here. Nothing to cause me shame. If I feel pleasure, then it is only the justifiable pride of a righteous man who knows he has done the Lord Grud's holy work. This is not the excitement a man feels looking upon the nakedness of women. It is a pure, holy feeling. Tonight, I am no longer Morris Weems. I have transcended the limits of flesh to become a holy instrument. I am the angel Uriel. I am the fire and the flame. I sit in judgement. I bring retribution to those who would put the laws of man before the laws of Grud.

As he stood there, watching the shifting patterns of darkness in the smoke and hearing the screams, he found his confidence in his own righteousness suddenly waning in the face of an inconvenient reality. He noticed the way his excitement at his work had chosen to physically manifest itself, and all the old feelings of shame returned, and with shame, as ever, came doubt. He found himself wondering if he was not really an angel as he had thought. Not unless, against all expectation and contrary to the received wisdoms of religious savants down through the ages, an angel could perhaps get an erection after all.

Abruptly, he heard the thud of something striking the window from inside, the sound making him jump. Again it happened, and he saw the window shake. Morris wondered if some unforeseen effect of the fire was about to make the window explode, catching him in the blast. Then, as the window shook once more, the smoke cleared enough for him to see the cause.

It was the fat man whom Morris had knocked unconscious and left to die in the fire. Head and arms haloed in flame, he beat against the window with his fists, pleading for escape as Morris stared at him blankly. Finding no answer, the fat man began to throw himself bodily against the plexiplast, trying to break through the window by sheer force of will. Taking a step backwards in case by some miracle the fat man actually managed to smash his way through, Morris moved his hand to the gun in his pocket and waited. He had often tried to imagine what it must be like for a man to die by fire. Now, he found he had the opportunity to see it for himself.

Then, incredibly, weakened by the fat man's frantic blows, the plexiplast started to crack. At last, with a final superhuman effort, the fat man leapt head first through the window to land facedown in the alley. Taking the gun from his pocket and tightening his finger on the trigger, Morris prepared to shoot the man in the head and be done with him. But as he aimed, he realised it was not needed. The fat man was dead already, as evidenced by the spreading pool of blood. Looking closely, Morris saw a jagged piece of plexiplast embedded in the fat man's neck. For all his desperation, the fat man had simply exchanged one death for another.

But even as he gazed down at the man's lifeless body, Morris felt a strange new inspiration run through him. Before he knew what he was doing, he was squatting down by the corpse and dipping his hand into the blood. Next, moving over to the wall, he began to write on it, feeling the rough surface of the plascrete under his fingertips mix with the warmth of the blood that covered his hand.

It is not enough to simply bring retribution to this city, he thought. I should leave a message. Something to let all the other sinners know I claim this act and that I will be coming for them all in time.

He was halfway through the message when he heard the scream. Looking at the letters "J", "U", and "D" written in blood on the wall before him, at first he dismissed the sound as nothing more than the cry of one of the dying customers caught inside the blazing eroto-palace. Until it occurred to him that the direction of this scream was different. It had come from *behind* him.

Whirling as he heard another scream, Morris saw a man and a woman standing in the alleyway, their faces aghast. For a moment, he stood staring at them, the dead man's blood still dripping from his fingers. Coming round, he did the only thing he could. Something that, Morris now realised, he should have done long ago.

He ran.

"Control to any unit vicinity Larry Flynt Recreational Plaza! Firebombing at Blue Dreams Eroto-Palace. Suspected perp reported fleeing scene in direction of Raymond Pedway. Available units please respond."

He had just taken down a gang of wreckers working the skedways when the call came in to him, the bike radio on his Lawmaster crackling as the calm yet urgent tones of Sector Control broke through the static. Chaining

the last of the surviving perps to a holding post, Judge William Brophy strode quickly to his bike and patched his helmet mike into the local Sector frequency.

"Acknowledged, Control," he said, mounting the bike and revving its engine into noisy life. "Judge Brophy responding. ETA to Raymond - two minutes. Request Pat-Wagon to Skedway Twenty-Twelve, off Gibson Junction. Three perps for pickup. Also notify Resyk there's two more for disposal."

"Received and understood. Fleeing perp is described as gaunt-featured, wearing a black overcoat with matching kneepads. Control out." The radio fell silent as Brophy pointed his bike in the direction of Raymond and gunned it down the skedway. Another tangent, moving inexorably towards its destination.

He heard the screaming first. Not the shrill cries of individuals in pain, but the collective animal moans of a crowd in panic. Hearing it coming from further down the pedway ahead of him, Jard stopped in his tracks, got a firmer grip on his satchel and wondered whether he should hold on to see what was happening or just turn and get the drokk out while the going was good. The fact he even paused at all was a mark of how much he had riding on the decision. If he was going to move the gemstones he needed to meet his buyer in Flynt Plaza by midnight. It was a strictly one-time proposition: the buyer had been nervous enough that if Jard did not make this meeting, there was not going to be another one. It was no show, no go. Jard nearly wet himself as he heard a Lawmaster siren shrieking its way closer and realised he should have had the sense to run while he still had the chance.

It's too late to run now, he told himself, aware of the sweat soaking through his collar. Damn Judges! If you run, they always figure you for being guilty of something. Got to play this like I'm John-Q-Innocent-Drokking-Citizen and hope it's not me they're after. Of all the drokking luck.

Clutching the satchel to his chest like he was cradling a baby, Jard stepped to a safe place at the side of the pedway and waited to see whether his dreams were over. Ahead of him, as the siren grew louder, the crowd seemed to flow and shift with a mind of its own as frightened citizens saw what was coming their way and decided to make themselves scarce.

Through a gap in the crowd, Jard saw a gaunt man in a long black overcoat running towards him with a Judge on a Lawmaster bike in hot pursuit.

Stupid drokker, Jard thought. Why don't you just give yourself up and let the rest of us go about in peace?

Realising there was no way he could outrun the bike, the perp pulled a slim semi-auto from inside his overcoat and started shooting at the Judge behind him. The shots did not even come close, although Jard saw a woman behind the Judge fall screaming to the ground with blood gushing from her throat. In response, the Judge drew his Lawgiver pistol and fired it in a single fluid motion, the bullet hitting the perp in the small of the back and sending him stumbling sideways across the pedway. With a dawning sensation of horror, Jard realised the dying perp was heading right for him, his spasming limbs carrying him towards a collision.

Jard tried to move out of the way, but it was too late. Seemingly in slow motion, the perp fell into him, a flailing arm inadvertently tangling in the strap of the satchel and ripping it from Jard's grasp. Appalled, Jard watched as the satchel went flying into the air, the flap pulling open and spilling the gemstones inside it onto the plascrete to land beside the body of the fallen perp. Jard heard a strange voice screaming in outraged disbelief as a thousand broken dreams fell glittering to the ground. It was his voice, he thought distantly, as he realised the sound would only make him seem even more guilty. But it did not matter. The way his luck was running, the Judge had no doubt seen everything. What was more, he was probably already calculating just how much cube time Jard had coming to him. As he watched the Judge bring his bike to a halt and come striding towards him, with a sinking heart Jard realised this was the big one. A repeat offender, the only way they would let him out of the iso-cubes this time was as an eldster. Always assuming, of course, they ever let him out at all.

Maybe if I get lucky they'll tag me as an obsessive/compulsive type and give me a pre-frontal, he thought, though it gave him little by way of comfort. Least that way I won't be able to count how many years I'm serving.

"You, stay where you are!" the Judge said, pausing to prod a menacing finger in Jard's direction, before kicking the fallen perp's gun away and kneeling to check his pulse. "I'll deal with you in a minute."

So much for tangents, thought Jard bitterly. Looks like maybe they ain't such a good thing after all.

Morris Weems was dying. Confused, his mind reeling at the realisation that these were the last moments he would ever know, he lay on his back on the pedway feeling the heat drain from him as he bled out the remains of his life onto the plascrete. Around him, the shapes and shadows of the world were growing fainter and less distinct. He was fading - all that he was, or had been, or would be, diminishing by the second. Where other men might have felt a sense of resignation, where they might have felt peace or even contentment, Morris felt only rage.

The world grew so dark that to Morris it seemed as though the darkness was consuming him, stripping away all he was and leaving nothing behind. He raged against that darkness. In fear he struggled to speak, to call out, to give some kind of voice to his despair, but he could no longer move or talk. All those things he had once taken for granted were now denied him. He was alone, blanketed in endless darkness and far from the light. Crushed, suffocated, drowning. Until, at last, summoning his final reserves of strength as his body grew finally cold, he screamed out. Not with a scream that could be heard, but with a scream of the mind. A scream of the soul.

Drawing on all his rage and pain and fury, Morris screamed into the darkness.

In the darkness, something heard him and whispered back.

ONE

BEATING THE DEVIL

Fifteen years later.

As far as Psi-Judge Cass Anderson could see, her current situation had all the makings of a first-class nightmare. She was in the Undercity deep beneath Mega-City One, moving through the lightless, debris-strewn streets of a ruined subterranean city populated by mutants, cannibals and monsters. She was hunting a crazed group of devil-worshippers who had abducted a little boy and were no doubt even now preparing to sacrifice him to their unholy god. And just to add spice to the proceedings, her only backup was a young Street Judge named Whitby who had become as twitchy as a rookie since they had left the comforting neon brightness of the Big Meg behind. Still, all else considered, she had to admit things could have been worse.

If this really had been a nightmare, and not just a particularly bad day at the office, she probably would have been naked as well.

"Grud, but it's quiet down here," Whitby whispered from beside her, the telltale tremor in his voice loud enough for Anderson not to need her powers to tell her he was scared. "Too quiet. The whole damn place gives me the creeps."

"Think of it as just another street," Anderson said. "No different from the streets topside. Remember, this is a hot pursuit. We need to stay sharp and keep it tight."

"I hear you," Whitby said, the beam of his torch moving to reveal more of the shadow-haunted ruins around them. "Just like topside. Sharp and tight. Check."

With that, he fell silent. Walking alongside him, Anderson could feel the fear coming off him in waves. It's the surroundings that do it, she thought. Tell a Judge like Whitby you want him to single-handedly put down a mass brawl in the roughest, most perp-ridden bar in the city and he won't bat an eyelid, but take him into the Undercity and he'll be as skittish as a newborn colt.

Anderson had to admit Whitby's anxiety was not entirely misplaced. She had been in the Undercity before, on more occasions than she cared to count, but no matter how many times she saw the same desolate wasteland

of empty crumbling buildings and cracked deserted streets, it remained an unsettling experience. The Undercity was all that was left of the pre-Atomic landscape that had preceded the mega-cities. They were the fossilised relics of the cities of a bygone age, plascreted over and left entombed and forgotten beneath the foundations of the world that had replaced it. It was easy to think of the whole place as a giant cemetery. The graveyard for an entire era. A city of the dead, and it looked as if some of the dead were moving.

"Contact," Whitby said, the barrel of his Lawgiver following the torch's beam as it picked out shadowy, misshapen figures moving stealthily through the rubble. "I count four, maybe five. Holy Grud, they don't look human. What in the name of hell are they?"

"Hold your fire," Anderson told him. "They're just troggies. Cannibals, descended from the people who got trapped down here when the Big Meg was built. The Undercity's full of them. Don't worry, they're only dangerous in large packs. The ones we can see are probably just a family group who heard us coming and got spooked into moving. Trust me, they're probably more scared of us than we are of them. Now, keep it down, I'm trying to concentrate."

Coming to a halt as Whitby stood nervously watching the shadows, Anderson closed her eyes and tried to blot out the distractions of her physical surroundings. Instead, she went deep inside herself, calling on the talents that had been both blessing and curse to her ever since she was a child. She cleared her mind, slowly opening it up to the strange frequencies and uncertain modulations of the unseen world around her - the psi-flux, they called it. A shifting, endlessly fluctuating realm of pure, raw energy that existed within every corner of the physical universe, yet was paradoxically outside both space and time. From the telepath to the telekinetic to all the psi-shades in-between, it was the mysterious force that gave every psychic their powers. In her years in Psi Division, courtesy of the lectures of visiting physicists, philosophers and no small number of Tek-Judges, Anderson had heard dozens of theories as to the precise nature of the flux.

Some said it was the accumulated psychic residue of all the sentient beings who had lived, were living now, or ever would live in the cosmos. Others called it the Source and Wellspring of All Creation: the vital force

without which the universe could never have come into existence. To the more religiously minded, it was the Breath of the Divine.

To Anderson, such theories were, at most, a matter of minor academic interest. All she knew was she had felt the presence of the psi-flux around her every moment of her life - long before she had ever heard it given a name. Whatever its mysteries, it was enough to her that she knew how to make use of it. Now, she needed to use it to help her find a missing child.

"I can see more of them." Whitby's voice intruded into her thoughts, disrupting her concentration. "The troggies, I mean. There's at least ten or twelve now. How many do there have to be before you'd call it a 'large pack'?"

"You see more than a hundred of them charging towards us, then you can get worried," she said. "Other than that, keep the headcount to yourself."

Anderson went inside herself once more. Concentrating on her breathing, she became aware of the rhythmic movements of her ribcage, the measured contractions and expansions of her lungs. She let her mind go blank, allowing the shifting tides of the psi-flux to wash over her. For a moment she felt weightless, divorced from every feeling and sensation. Then, like a low murmur, she heard a drifting babble of dim and distant voices as she opened her mind to experience the thoughts and emotions of every creature around her. She felt Whitby, saw beneath the fragile façade of the typical iron-faced Street Judge to the mass of anxieties and insecurities churning within. She felt the troggies, dozens of them now, hidden in the darkness, fear and hunger warring within them as they gathered in ever greater numbers and tried to work up the courage to attack. She knew all these things already. If she wanted to find the boy she would need to narrow the search, focus her perceptions on what she knew of him and hope it would be enough.

His name was Himmie Durand. In her mind's eye she could see the holo-pic his parents had shown her. Seven years old, blond hair, blue eyes, a gap-toothed smile. He had been abducted a little over three hours ago from the family's apartment in Billy Friedkin Block. Just an ordinary kid, but from the moment she'd first walked into the apartment, Anderson had known the case had "bad dream" written all over it - a feeling soon confirmed as a routine psi-scan of one of the Durand's neighbours established the kid had been abducted by a coven of would-be Satanists. Growing tired of the usual orgies, the coven had decided to sacrifice a child in the hope of summoning

their dark lord to Earth. Following the coven's trail had led Anderson and Whitby down into the block basement, and from there through an underblock maintenance duct to a hole into the Undercity. Now, with the clock ticking down to midnight - the set time for the sacrifice - they had just fifteen minutes left to find Himmie Durand and save him.

Fifteen minutes to find one little boy lost in all this darkness, she thought. Talk about banking on a miracle.

If she was honest with herself, she knew it was not just the case itself that was giving her the heebies, it was the eerie similarities between this case and an old case she had worked on years ago. The way the abduction of Himmie Durand brought to mind another case involving a child that she only wished she could forget. A case that, even now, still haunted her nightmares.

Hammy Blish.

It had started as a case of demonic possession, a case that had gone bad in the worst possible way. Like Himmie Durand, Hammy Blish had been just a typical everyday kid, until a cult of warlocks and an other-dimensional demon had tried to use him to unlock a portal between Mega-City One and the demon's home dimension. From there, things had gone steadily downhill until, at last, Anderson was called upon to make one of the hardest decisions of her life. Unable to find any other way to prevent a demonic invasion of Earth that would have claimed millions of lives, she had been forced to kill Hammy Blish. There had been no other choice. Yet still, in her dreams almost every night, she relived the moment over and over again. She remembered Hammy, his expression so trusting, so sure she had come to save him. She remembered the look of confusion turning to disbelief as the bullet struck him. Most of all, she remembered the final look he gave her. The look as he sank dying to his knees, staring at her in mute accusation, his eyes asking a last despairing question. But you're a Judge, they said. You were supposed to protect me. How could you kill me?

Even after all these years, she did not have an answer.

I won't let it happen again, she promised herself. Not this time. I won't let another boy die.

She only hoped it was within her power to keep the promise.

"Anderson?" It was Whitby, the tremor in his voice growing more pronounced. "That headcount's getting up into triple figures. And I can hear

the troggies muttering between themselves. Something about 'good eatins' and 'finger-lickin'."

"Shut up," she whispered. "I'm getting closer. The boy's near, I can feel it. A few more seconds and I'll have a location-"

Anderson paused, her concentration broken once and for all by a distant sound. Before she knew what she was doing, she had opened her eyes and started to run, her Lawgiver in her hand and Whitby trailing dutifully after her. They scrambled across rubble-littered streets, breathless and heedless of danger, drawn by a single shrill sound from somewhere ahead of her. A sound she heard sometimes in her dreams. A sound she had hoped in the real world she would never hear again.

The sound of a boy's voice. Screaming.

The screaming stopped. Guided by her instincts and refusing to consider what the silence might mean, Anderson knew which way she was heading. Running to the end of the street, she vaulted the fallen brickwork of a collapsed wall, turned east to cross a vacant lot, then turned north once more and saw her destination ahead of her. It was an old church, dwarfed in the menacing shadows of the buildings on either side, with light spilling out from within it through the shattered sockets of what had once been stained-glass windows. Racing closer, Anderson heard chanting drift towards her from inside the church. The ritual was underway. She could only hope she wasn't too late.

"Anderson," Whitby said breathlessly. "We don't know what we're up against here. We should call for backup."

Ignoring him, Anderson charged towards the entrance of the church and kicked the splintering doors open. Pushing past them with Whitby just behind her, she smelt the cloying stench of burning incense and saw a dozen hooded men standing around a desecrated altar. She saw the assorted paraphernalia of occult sacrifice: jagged-bladed knives, a silver chalice, black candles, wands and staves, the outline of a chalk pentagram drawn on the floor. Standing at the head of the group, she saw the Coven Master step forward with a knife in his hands to loom over the small form of Himmie Durand, tied spread-eagled to the altar before him.

"Lord Satan," the Coven Master screamed, raising the knife while the chanting of his followers reached a crescendo. "We call out to you across

the dark abyss. *Ari Nostrum Elophim*! Accept this offering from your unworthy servants. Accept it, and let the great chasm be bridged."

Firing two rounds in quick succession, Anderson saw the bullets take the Coven Master in the centre of the chest, his knife dropping noisily on the floor. Startled by the shots, the chant dying on their lips, for a moment the Coven Master's followers watched in stunned silence as their leader fell sprawling backwards to land in a crumpled heap in the middle of the pentagram. With a buzz of angry whispers that quickly became roars of rage, the coven members charged towards Anderson and Whitby, eager for blood.

"Rapid Fire - Standard Execution," Anderson said, impressed at how calmly Whitby followed her lead now they were in combat. "Aim high. We don't want to hit the boy."

Standing side-by-side, they fired in unison, Lawgivers blazing out a fusillade of shots to cut down the shrieking coven members in mid-stride. In a matter of seconds it was finished, leaving Anderson and Whitby framed in the church's doorway, looking towards the lifeless bodies of a dozen men strewn haphazardly across the floor.

"Drokkers should've known better than to bring knives to a gunfight," Whitby said, the ruthless mask of the Street Judge restored as he reloaded his Lawgiver. "Probably figured they had nothing left to lose. Abduction. Attempted Murder. Conspiracy to Commit on both counts. Resisting Arrest. Celebrating Mass Without a Licence. They were looking at thirty years apiece, easy." He looked over his shoulder to glance out of the doorway. "Looks like the troggies didn't follow us. Either that, or all the gunfire scared them off. Guess we can pick up the kid and get back to the Meg. It's over."

"Over?" Anderson said quietly, still looking towards the altar. "I only wish it were."

Something was wrong. She could feel it. There was a tingling sensation at the back of her scalp, and she knew her instincts were trying to warn her. Reaching out to the psi-flux, she felt a dark current moving towards them. Something was coming. Something dark and powerful and ancient. Something *bad*. Anderson was confused. They had prevented the sacrifice and the coven members were dead. How could there be anything else for them to deal with here? Then she noticed something beside the altar and she had her answer.

It was the Coven Master's body. He had fallen in the centre of the pentagram, the blood seeping out of the wounds in his chest seeming to move with a mind of its own towards the chalk lines of the symbol around it. Watching in silent horror, Anderson saw the oozing blood spread out to follow the exact lines of the pentagram like an artist inking over a pencil sketch. Soon, the chalk lines of the original symbol were no longer visible, leaving in its place a pentagram drawn in fresh sacrificial blood. Inadvertently perhaps, it seemed the Coven Master had ended up as the victim in his own ritual. The sacrifice had been completed. A doorway had been opened, and, through it, something wicked was coming their way.

"Merciful Grud." Whitby's voice was a choked whisper. "The Coven Master's body is moving."

It began with the smell of brimstone. The body swelled, the sound of tearing cloth as nothing compared to the awful sound of the tearing of shifting flesh. Before their horrified eyes, it tried to stand, splaying its newly-clawed hands on the ground before it as it pushed itself upright.

"Rapid Fire - Standard Execution," Anderson yelled, already pulling the trigger of her Lawgiver. "We have to try to destroy the body before it can fully manifest itself."

"What about incendiaries? Hi-ex?" Whitby said. "Can't we blow the thing to pieces?"

"No, Himmie's too close. The blast would kill him." Anderson replied, as the thing in the pentagram cast aside the shreds of the Coven Master's robes and began to croon softly to them.

"Childrrennn," it said, as though tasting the words and deciding whether it liked them or not. "Childrrrennnn... Childrennnn... Childrennnn."

Whatever the hell it was, it didn't look like Satan. More like his ugly big brother. Raising itself to its full height, the thing was two and a half metres tall, its body skinless to better reveal the writhing wet musculature of its flesh. It had three long fingers on each hand, reverse-jointed ankles and a mouth full of sharp smiling teeth that looked too wide for its face. A second mouth, even wider, set in the middle of its abdomen, did the talking.

"Childrennnn," it rasped. "Trying to hurt meee... Stuuupid childrennnn." For a moment, the creature paused, extending a claw towards Himmie. Anderson's heart skipped a beat. "Hnnn... Innocennnnts... Goood fooooodd." Then, drooling in hunger, it turned to look at Anderson with both mouths smiling. "Hnnn... But psi... Always betterrrr."

It sprang forward with a lumbering, uncertain gait, thick ropy strands of drool dribbling from its mouths. Firing his Lawgiver, Whitby rushed forward to meet it, only for the demon to knock him flying with a backhanded blow. Quickening its pace, it strode towards Anderson, the twin smiles growing ever wider.

"Psi... Gooood psi... Commme to mmmy mmmmouths."

Standing her ground until the creature was right on top of her, Anderson leapt away at the last instant. She landed to the side and behind it, rolling to her feet and making a dash for the altar, all the time hoping that something she had seen there when she entered the church had not been lost in all the chaos since. She heard the demon turn and follow her, then she saw it: a glint of silver lying by the side of the altar.

The chalice.

As desperate last-ditch plans went, she figured it was right up there with the best of them. Having failed to kill the creature with normal bullets, and figuring incendiaries and hi-ex would be next to useless, she had decided her best chance was to use the one thing that always seemed to give other-dimensional creatures a headache. Silver. She had seen it work before. As a Psi-Judge, she was even equipped with a special issue silver boot knife for just such emergencies. But she no more wanted to go hand-to-hand with that thing than she would want to dance a tango with Judge Death. Besides, there wasn't enough silver in her knife for what she had in mind. She needed something bigger.

Reaching the altar, Anderson grabbed the chalice and threw it toward the advancing demon. With surprising speed, the demon caught it. It held the chalice up as though to tease her.

"Silverrr," it said. The fact its hand was smouldering slightly at the touch of the chalice seemed in no way to dampen its amusement. "Cleverrr psi... But yourrr silverrr is mine now... Herrre in my hand."

"Between you and me, ugly, that's just where I wanted it," Anderson said, aiming her Lawgiver at the chalice and firing it. "Hi-explosive."

Detonating as it struck the chalice, the hi-ex round exploded, turning what had once been an exquisite piece of artisanship into a hail of shrapnel. Its look of triumph disappearing as jagged shards of silver peppered its face, chest and arm, the demon screamed, smoke pouring from a dozen burning wounds. The screams grew louder, the mouth in the demon's face opening to join its belly-mouth in a shrill duet of pain. In a flash of eldritch light and

the stench of yet more brimstone, it was gone, the only sign of its passing a smoking pile of ash.

Leaving Anderson to think that, as far as desperate last-ditch plans went, it had not been half bad.

The boy's eyes were closed. As she approached the altar, for a moment Anderson feared Himmie was dead. She noticed the rise and fall of his chest and realised he was still breathing. Checking his pulse, she was reassured to find he was just unconscious.

He probably fainted at some point during the ritual, she thought. At least I hope he did. That way he wouldn't have seen the demon. Poor kid's probably traumatised enough without having the memory of that to add to his nightmares.

"So I guess this means we killed Satan?" a voice said behind her. "Or you did, anyway."

It was Whitby. His left arm held in an improvised sling, he looked shaken but not too worse for wear.

"Thanks," she said. "It would look good on my rep, but I'll have to pass on that one. That thing was no more Satan than I'm the Chief Judge. Just some low-class demon who lucked by when these idiots opened a portal and thought he'd have himself a free lunch. How you holding up?"

"Busted shoulder," he shrugged reflexively, then winced at the movement. "Nothing fifteen minutes in the speedheal won't fix. So, what next? We take the boy back to his family and it's a happy ending all around?"

"Something like that," she said, looking down at Himmie Durand and remembering the face of Hammy Blish.

A happy ending. It felt good to have one of those every once in a while.

TWO

CUSTODIAL INTERFERENCE

"Control to any unit vicinity Gaultier Megamart. Mass brawl at Crazy Egbert's House of Fashion. Available units please respond."

"Control to any unit vicinity Alvin Toffler Block. Futsie on the rampage. Be advised, subject reported to be armed with flamethrower. Available units please respond."

"Control to any unit vicinity Kevorkian Precinct. Suspected homicide at Florrie Nightingale Crock Block. Available units please respond."

By the display of the wall clock opposite his desk, it was seventeen minutes past midnight. The graveyard shift. It looked to be a busy night at Sector House 12. Sitting alone in his private office on the twentieth floor of the Sector House, Sector Chief Joseph Franklin heard the staccato bulletins issuing from the comms-feed beside him and wondered if he should break with habit and turn it off.

The feed was patched into the radio frequencies Sector Control used to communicate with the Judges on the street, spewing endless updates on every crime and emergency as it happened. For fifteen years, ever since he first made chief, Franklin had kept the comms-feed running routinely in his office night and day. Normally, he found it soothing. With the feed blaring constantly in the background he felt connected to the pulse of his sector. More than that, it reminded him of his own days on the streets - days he increasingly looked back upon with rosy nostalgia. Listening to the feed at night as he tried to catch up with his paperwork, it no longer seemed a comfort. The feed taunted him, acting as a barbed reminder of all the things in his life he stood on the brink of losing forever.

"Judge Farrow to Control. Responding to that call of a suspected homicide at Nightingale Crock Block. Make that multiple homicides. Eight bodies so far, all eldsters. Looks like we've got an 'angel of mercy' on our hands-"

He had heard enough. Switching the comms-feed off, Franklin briefly glanced at the stack of files sitting on his desk, before turning in his chair to look at the view of the night sky through his office window. Outside, it was clear and cloudless, the cityscape of Mega-City One granted an eerie, spectral light by the bright moon.

It's three-quarters full at most, he thought. With all the chaos on the streets, you would have sworn it was a full moon night. Right now, the entire sector is in the middle of the worst recorded crime wave in ten years. Assaults, homicides, futsies; every kind of violent crime is way above the seasonal average and rising. It's been that way for the last three weeks. Almost ever since Justice Department made the first public announcement they were moving the Sector House.

He wondered if the two events could be related. The building he currently occupied was due to be demolished in a month's time, to be replaced by a newly built facility elsewhere in the sector. Already, Sector House 12 was operating at minimum staffing levels as personnel and equipment were transferred to the new facility in preparation for the move. Could some unknown party be trying to take advantage of the situation to create chaos as part of a wider agenda? Franklin dismissed the idea. Everything he had seen over the last few weeks told him there was no hidden hand at work. Crime levels might be up, but the statistics showed the causes of the crimes in question were so commonplace as to be almost humdrum: domestic disputes, fights between neighbours, arguments in the street that spiralled out of control and turned to violence. They were ordinary crimes of the kind a Street Judge saw a dozen times in the course of a normal shift. Crimes born of the frustrations of four hundred million people living right on top of each other with no room to breathe.

No, if the current crime wave had any deeper cause, it was simply that public awareness of the Sector House's imminent closure had served to undermine the subtle balance of power in the sector. A Sector House was more than just a building to the citizens of Mega-City One. It was a plascrete symbol of the Justice Department itself, a daily reminder of the Law that ruled the city. While in reality Sector House 12 was only moving, psychologically to the citizens it did not matter. Even the idea of a Sector House closing suggested an element of impermanence to the forces that controlled their lives. It weakened the hold the Justice Department had over their minds, diminishing a vital bulwark that helped to keep the worst excesses of the human soul in check.

Making a mental note to order an increase in street patrols and crime swoops to remind the citizens of Sector 12 just who was in charge, Franklin tried to return to his paperwork. It was no good. Even now the comms-feed

was silent, he found it hard to concentrate. The restless thoughts churning through his head would not allow it.

I suppose the closure had to happen eventually, he told himself. Sector House 12 has been in operation more than fifty years. Things have changed a lot since then. There's new technology, new forensics, new threats. To keep pace with those changes, they've updated the systems in these old walls so many times the entire Sector House is little more than a jury-rigged hotchpotch held together with glue and spit. Frankly, the place is so decrepit it's a wonder it doesn't just collapse. When I think of how often I pushed for a replacement Sector House to be built. When I think of all the time I spent in meetings and before committees, pleading for resources. Through it all, through every budget hearing and planning session, I never realised I was digging my own grave. I never realised, once they finally decided to give in and build a new Sector House, they would also want a new Sector Chief to go with it.

There was a letter sitting in the drawer of his desk, written on official stationery headed with the Justice Department seal and signed by the Chief Judge herself. Franklin felt the urge to read it, but he resisted the temptation. In the last three weeks he had read the letter so many times he knew the words by heart. To read it again would only be to willingly inflict himself with more pain by picking at the scabs of half-healed wounds. His heart was heavy enough with pain already.

They were retiring him, putting him out to pasture. That was what the letter said. Granted, it did not put it quite so bluntly. Instead, it congratulated him on his forty-five years of active service and offered him a teaching post at the Academy of Law, but the subtext was clear: he was surplus to requirements. He was an old man past his prime, no longer needed. In the eyes of the Justice Department he was a dinosaur - every bit as much a relic as the Sector House he commanded. To underline its message, an addendum to the letter had arrived a week later, informing him Judge Meryl Coolidge had been chosen as his successor and asking him to do everything he could to acclimatise her to the sector when she arrived to take up her duties at the new Sector House in a month's time.

I hear Coolidge is a good Judge, he thought. Tough as nails and a competent administrator with it. Though I find it precious little comfort to know I'll have such an able replacement.

He could still turn down the offer. He could refuse to join the Academy. That would leave only a single option open to him: the Long Walk. He would be sent out into the Cursed Earth, expected to bring law to the rad-infested wastelands outside the city. Alone in an inhospitable landscape, surrounded on every side by freaks and mutants, he would be lucky to survive a month. As a younger man he might have made the decision gladly, content to go out in a blaze of glory. But the years had taken their toll. If he was honest with himself, he knew there was no more chance of him taking the Long Walk than there ever had been of him making Chief Judge. No matter what his frustrations, he had no other choice but to swallow his pride. He would accept what they had given him. He would take the Academy job, and for one simple reason. Like it or not, his years had made him a coward.

When did it happen, he thought? When did I become an old man, afraid to die?

He realised his reputation was all he had left. Forty-five years of active service, and he had never once been disciplined. His career had been spotless. He had never violated regs, nor done anything to earn any form of censure. He was a model Judge. A straight shooter. There were no black marks on his record. In the twilight of his years, maintaining that unblemished record had become important to him. Above all else, he refused to see his career end on a sour note. No matter the powers-that-be had decided to cast him aside, he would not allow it to affect his performance. In the weeks to come he would see out his remaining time with the same diligence as always, ensuring a smooth transition as the current Sector House closed and the old made way for the new. When the day came to hand the reins of power over to Coolidge, he would leave Sector 12 with head held high, knowing he left behind a record of service that showed for fifteen long years this small part of the Big Meg had been a better place due to his presence. He had commanded with firmness and intelligence. He had maintained order. He had upheld the Law.

There was only one small problem, a dark cloud that troubled his horizon and threatened to undo all his good work.

Sighing, Franklin picked up the folder at the top of the pile of files on his desk and opened it. It was embossed with the skullheaded symbol of SJS - the Special Judicial Squad, a semi-autonomous division within Justice Department given wide ranging powers to investigate their fellow Judges in

cases of suspected malfeasance. A preliminary report, sent to him as a courtesy, it detailed an ongoing investigation into a series of suspicious deaths in custody that had occurred in the Sector House's holding cubes over the last two weeks. It made unwelcome reading. In content, the report was short on evidence and long on unsubstantiated allegations, but Franklin knew he could not ignore it. As much as he might wish the entire business would just go away, he had to try to resolve the matter somehow. He had to take action.

Otherwise, the whole thing had "sour note" and "black mark" written all over it in big, ugly letters.

"Sector Control to Custody Command," the voice said over the speaker. "Catch Wagon inbound with twenty-four - that is two four - perps for processing. ETA to your location: six minutes. Confirm."

"Confirmed, Control," Judge Mullins said, inputting the new figures into the computer terminal set in the console in front of him. "Twenty-four perps inbound. We're getting pretty full down here. Request iso-block transport ASAP to relieve overcrowding. Over."

"Negative, Custody. All transports currently engaged. Sector's so busy you'd think there was a Block War on. Will advise you as soon as situation changes. Sector Control out."

It was turning into a hell of a night. Standing beside his control station in the Custody Command Room opposite the holding pens on basement sub-level two, Chief Warder Judge Abel Sykes looked at the Situation Board and grimaced in annoyance. Twenty-four more prisoners inbound, while according to the board's holographic display they were already running at ninety-eight percent capacity. The cubes were full, and they had been packing perps into the holding pens like canned synthi-fish all night. A twenty-five year man, Sykes didn't need to turn to look through the reinforced plasteen viewport at the holding pens behind him to know things were in danger of turning ugly out there. Litterer and murderer alike, he knew every new perp came to the Sector House nursing a fresh grudge against the system.

Overcrowding made them more volatile, increasing the likelihood of their lashing out at their warders as the nearest representatives of that system. This left it to him as chief warder to keep a careful lid on things,

walking the tightrope between protecting his men and not being so hard on the prisoners as to trigger a full-scale riot.

"Another twenty-four prisoners inbound, chief," Mullins said. "We're already approaching the permitted safety threshold for prisoner numbers."

"I'm not deaf, Mullins," he replied. "I heard you over the comm with Sector Control. And I can read the Situation Board as well as you can. Contact the watch commander upstairs and tell him I'm putting the interrogation cubes off-limits until further notice. If his Judges want to question any perps they can do it in the hallways. Next, radio Murcheson in the holding pens and tell him to start filtering out the non-violents. Jaywalkers, litterers, loiterers - he can use his discretion. Tell him to put them in restraints and transfer them to the interrogation cubes to free up space in the pens. And tell him to have his men suit up in their riot gear, just in case."

Turning away as Mullins switched through the comm-channels to relay his instructions, Sykes stared for a moment through the viewport at the prisoners in the holding pen closest to him. On the other side of the pen's bars he saw a sea of faces. Each one was angry, vainly and silently cursing the unfairness of a life that had seen them caught and imprisoned for their crimes. Not for the first time in his life, it seemed he had seen every one of those faces before. In his years as a warder he had seen thousands of perps. They were all the same to him. Pushed far enough they were all potential Judge killers: the only question was how much each individual perp would take before he showed his true colours. When it came to safeguarding the lives of Judges, Sykes didn't believe in taking chances. He ran things hard and tight, always putting the lives of his men first.

Time was when that was good enough, he thought. Time was when a chief warder's judgement was respected, instead of being second-guessed all the time. I run a tight ship, and I make sure those under my command are good men. After what's been happening over the last two weeks, suddenly none of it counts for drokk, and you know with five prisoners dead it's only a matter of time before those bastards in SJS start looking for somebody to carry the can. Somebody senior enough to put all the blame on. Somebody like me.

Sykes felt queasy and realised he was getting nervous. For a man accustomed to facing the threat of violent death every day, it was a strange

sensation, but he knew it was a feeling he might have to get used to if prisoners kept dying on his watch.

Don't let it happen again, he thought, surprised at his own desperation. Don't let there be another incident. Not tonight.

He could only hope to Grud someone was listening.

Eighteen years, thought Leland Barclay, lying on a bunk in one of the Sector House's holding cubes. And it ain't even like I killed anybody. Eighteen years. What the hell kind of minimum sentence is that?

It had all seemed so easy when Arnie Coogan first came to him with the idea for the heist. They had been sitting in Leland's apartment, watching reruns of old Jetball games on the Tri-D, when Arnie had started talking about how much money the kneepad-mart in their block mall must be making every night. "A couple of smart guys like us, we could take the place down no problem," Arnie said. "Five minutes in and out, and we'd have enough of a score that we'd never need to work again."

Strictly speaking, neither of them worked. Not legal jobs, anyway. Leland and Arnie were professional looters and had been for six years. Whenever some crisis blew up, the two of them would hotfoot it to the scene, break into the shops and steal anything they could lay their hands on while the Judges were otherwise occupied. Riots, block wars, terrorist attacks, disasters, invasions - there was always something going on somewhere in the Mega-City enabling them to make a decent living. But while Leland had been content with his lot, Arnie had been a man with bigger ambitions.

"Think about it, Leland," Arnie had said. "We do one heist and get some real money. Then, we use it as seed money. I know a guy who deals stookie. It's fast turnaround and high profit. We buy in with him, we could double, even triple our investment inside a month. Six months, and we'll be millionaires! After that we could go legit, maybe buy ourselves a nightclub or one of them dream palaces. You know what they say about money: the first million's the hardest part. To start it off, all we need are a couple of masks and some hardware. Stump guns, if we can get 'em. They say they're good for intimidation. We wrap 'em up in gift paper so when we go into the mart it looks like we're just carrying presents. Then, five minutes in and out. It'll be a piece of cake."

I should've never listened, Leland thought glumly. Looting was nice safe work. Why'd I have to let myself get talked into doing an ARV?

The heist had gone smoothly enough. They'd gone in, shown their guns and that was pretty much it. After they had cracked the manager in the nose for talking back, nobody else had tried anything stupid; the staff and the customers had done what they were told, no problem. He and Arnie had even managed to grab themselves some nice-looking kneepads as well as the money. It had been the perfect job. Until, as they were leaving the store exactly four minutes and forty-nine seconds after they'd entered it, Arnie had to go and flap his fat mouth.

"See, Leland?" Arnie had said. "A piece of cake, just like I told you. Now you can afford to get your wife that boob job just like you've always wanted."

At the time, he had thought nothing of it. It was only when a Judge kicked in the door while Leland was counting his cut in his apartment that it occurred to him maybe the heist hadn't gone so smoothly after all.

"How did you find me?" Leland had asked, staring down the bore of the Judge's Lawgiver and thinking it looked big enough to swallow him whole.

"How'd you think, genius?" the Judge replied. "Audio on the surveillance cameras at the pad-mart picked up your partner calling you 'Leland'. That, and the fact your wife wasn't too well-endowed. How many guys you think fit that profile and happen to live in the same block where the robbery took place? Piece of cake. Now, give up your partner's name without me having to take you back to the Sector House for interrogation and I'm prepared to go easy on you. Minimum sentence."

The whole damn thing was Arnie's fault anyway, Leland thought as he lay on the bunk staring at the ceiling. If the dumb bastard had kept his mouth shut, I wouldn't be in this mess, so I squealed on him.

Sadly, Arnie had refused to see things that way. When the Judge had brought him out of the block in cuffs and he saw Leland already chained to a holding post on the street waiting for him, Arnie had gone crazy. He'd kicked and bit and screamed so much the Judge driving the Catch Wagon had put him in a gag and restraints. The real shame of it was that he and Arnie had been friends ever since they were juves. Although, however Leland looked at it now, he had to figure their friendship was over.

Serves the asshole right, he thought. And it ain't like they wouldn't have caught up with him eventually anyway. Only thing I regret is not thinking to

ask the Judge what the minimum sentence was. Eighteen years! So much for going easy on me. Damn Judges. You just can't trust 'em.

Leland was in a holding cube in Sector House 12, waiting for a transport to take him to the iso-block where he'd be spending the next eighteen years of his life. The second they had come into processing and the Judges had removed his gag, Arnie had started screaming again, telling anybody who would listen his partner was a rat. The warders had put Leland in his own private cube instead of the holding pens, probably figuring he would be safer that way.

So this is what a holding cube looks like, he thought. A bunk, a sink, a shower and a toilet: that's about it for the furnishings. Oh, and a surveillance camera to watch my every move. I guess an iso-cube will look pretty much the same, and I got to spend eighteen years in one. Grud. It might as well be a life sentence.

The lights went off, plunging the windowless cube into darkness. Must be time for lights out, Leland thought. I didn't think I was supposed to be staying here long enough to have to bed down for the night.

Leland Barclay, he heard a voice say nearby, the sound of it nearly making him jump out of his skin. Someone was in there with him! Leland sat up in his bunk in panic. He couldn't see anything. Frightened, he pulled his legs up onto the bunk with him like a child scared of the bogeyman. Leland sat and listened, ears straining to hear the sounds of movement or breathing. But there was only the voice again, its tone low and quiet.

Leland Barclay. The sound, a barely audible murmur.

Leland Barclay. A strange voice, malign and knowing.

Leland Barclay. A whisper in the darkness.

It is time to be judged...

Grud, Chief Warder Sykes thought as the lights went out and the Custody Command Room fell into sudden darkness. It's happening again.

The emergency lights kicked in, bathing the room and the holding pens beyond it in a dim blue light. The chief warder was already on the move. He put his helmet on and grabbed a torch from a rack as he headed for the door.

"Chief!" he heard Mullins call after him from the comms console. "Tek-Bay reports a power outage across the entire Sector House. Backup generators are out as well. We've got emergency lights and comms operating off battery supplies and that's about it."

"Tell them we need power down here now," he said, halfway through the door. "Priority code: eight five seven alpha one. The second they get any kind of power source back online, they're to route it through to us. Tell them Sector Chief Franklin authorised it personally."

"Roger, chief. You want me to radio Murcheson in holding and tell him to instigate emergency procedures?"

"I'll tell him. I'm already on my way."

As he stepped outside into the corridor, the emergency lights faded, returning the world to darkness. Turning on his torch, Sykes moved quickly past the holding pens. Everywhere, he could hear the muttering voices of the caged perps around him, angry, complaining, calling out for light. Then, seeing the glow of more torches ahead of him, he found Murcheson waiting at the end of the corridor with half a dozen other Judges in riot gear.

"Holding pens secure and all warders accounted for, chief," Murcheson said, gesturing with his own torch towards his men. "We were about to check the cubes. I had Cates break out a couple of crowbars, just in case."

There was a scream in the distance, the voice of a man in pain, echoing shrilly through the corridor. A breathless animal sound that spoke of agony and torment.

"It's coming from the holding cubes," Sykes yelled as he ran. "Kenner, Johannson, stay here and guard the pens. The rest of you with me, and bring those crowbars."

The screaming grew louder, rising to a shrieking falsetto as Sykes pushed his way into the holding cube area with Murcheson and the others.

"It's coming from Cube Two-Thirteen," Murcheson said. "Try the door."

"No good," Sykes said, tapping his override code into the door's keypad. "There's no power for the locks. We'll have to force it open."

Two Judges forced their crowbars into the small gap between door and jamb and tried to lever it open. At first, the door held; then, as Sykes and the others joined them in their labours, the door started to shift.

"It's starting to move," Murcheson said, grunting with effort. "I can feel it."

The screaming stopped. They pushed harder until finally, straining with herculean effort, the Judges began to force the door open.

"Almost there," Murcheson said, then recoiled, nearly falling over Sykes in his haste to step back from the cube. "Oh drokk! That smell..."

Sykes smelt the sickening stench of burnt flesh. Shining his torch into the cube, he saw a pall of smoke hanging into the air. Stepping into the cube he heard retching behind him as Murcheson vomited. Sweeping the beam of his torch through the haze, he saw what had become of the man in Cube Two-Thirteen and felt his gorge rising.

"Sweet Grud," he heard someone whisper. "They burned the poor bastard alive. Just like the others."

His body charred and blackened by fire, the dead man sat on the bunk with his knees against his chest, his head back and his mouth frozen open as though in a silent scream. The bunk, the sheets, even the man's clothing were all undamaged; the fire that killed him had burnt only his flesh.

The overhead lights flared back into life and Sykes saw something that told him all his worst fears had been realised. The killer had struck again, leaving a message in the shape of a word scrawled on the cube wall beside the corpse. A word that seemed to mock them.

The word was *Judged*, written in blood.

THREE

UNWELCOME ALLIES

Considering some of the things that could happen to a missing child in Mega-City One, Judge Kelland Whitby had to figure the Durand case had turned out better than expected. Emerging from the Undercity with Himmie in tow, Whitby and Anderson had taken the boy back to Billy Friedkin Block for a tearful reunion with his parents. The kid had seemed fine - though Anderson had given him a quick psi-scan before they got to Friedkin just to be on the safe side. If there had been one problem, it was that Whitby had found it difficult to look the boy's parents in the face when they thanked him for returning their son to them. Caught up in the moment, their eyes still shining with tears of joy, they kept calling him a hero. It seemed wrong, somehow. Feeling uncomfortable, not quite knowing how to tell them Anderson had saved their kid solo, Whitby had made his excuses and left as soon as he could. A hero. Right now he felt about as far from that exalted state as a man could get.

All I did was trail around after Anderson and get my ass handed to me by a demon, he thought as he made his way down in the block elevator. If it hadn't been for her, both me and the Durand kid would be dead by now. Anderson was the hero, not me.

It was an emotion he was used to, the feeling that he was forever trailing in the wake of heroes. Even though five years had passed since he had graduated from the Academy of Law, Whitby still found himself beset by doubts every time he hit the streets. He hid it well, of course - he had to, or his watch commander would have busted him back to citizen fast enough to make his head spin. Whitby made a point of showing he could break heads and chase down perps with the best of them, but no matter how well he did his duty, it was never enough. He found it impossible to escape the nagging doubt he did not have what it took to be a Judge.

Dredd. Giant. Hershey. Not to mention Anderson herself. These were the names talked about in the Sector House locker rooms. Judges like that cast a long shadow. Each one was a legend in the city, looked up to by citizens and their fellow Judges alike. When Whitby had been a cadet, the Judge-tutors at the Academy had talked about those same Judges, presenting reviews of some of their cases as examples of the standards the cadets

would be expected to meet when they became Judges themselves. Now, through a quirk of fate, Whitby had worked a case with one of these legends. Granted, they had cracked the case and Himmie Durand had been saved, but pleasing as that outcome was, in every other aspect Whitby had found the entire night to be a dispiriting experience. One night working alongside Anderson, and it seemed to him all his secret fears were confirmed.

Maybe I'm just not good enough, he thought bleakly. You work with somebody like Anderson and you see just how far you are from making the grade. All night, no matter what happened, she didn't so much as bat an eyelid. The Undercity, the cultists, the demon: she took them all in her stride. It was like nothing could faze her, and you don't get that from being psychic. You don't learn it in the Academy. She's a Judge. A real Judge. It's a knack, an attitude. Maybe it's something you're born with but, whatever it is, I just don't seem to have it.

"Ground level: block entrances and exit," the automated voice of the elevator trilled in electronic contentment as the doors opened at his destination. "We hope you enjoyed your time at William Friedkin Block. Please come again."

Emerging into the foyer, Whitby made his way through the outside doors to the block forecourt where he and Anderson had parked their bikes. He mounted his Lawmaster and keyed the ignition, feeling a sudden pain in his broken shoulder from the vibrations rattling through him as the engine hummed into life.

"Judge Whitby to Sector Control," he said, still wincing as he patched his helmet mike into the sector frequency.

"Sector Control, receiving," the voice came over the comm. "Reported break-in at Mistress Sindy's Rubber-o-Rama, off De Sade Plaza. Please advise as to your ETA."

"Negative, Control. Request to be taken off active roster until further notice. Have sustained a line-of-duty injury and I am inbound to Sector House for treatment."

"Understood. Do you require a med-wagon or other assistance?"

"Negative, Control. I can make it in on my own. ETA to Sector House: seven minutes."

"Acknowledged. Will advise med-bay you're on your way. Sector Control out."

Adjusting the bike computer so he would not need to use his left arm to manipulate the controls, Whitby was about to set off for the Sector House when he heard a voice calling after him.

"Hey, Whitby, wait up!"

Anderson jogged towards him and jumped onto her Lawmaster. "You lit out of there pretty fast," she said. "I take it you thought with the job done it was time to ride off into the sunset."

"Sunset?" he said, confused. "It's after midnight, Anderson."

"It's an expression, Whitby," she smiled. "Never mind. I guess I should know better than to joke with a Street Judge. I swear they must surgically remove your senses of humour in the Academy. Either that, or they teach extra classes in scowling. You know, we do have reason to be cheerful. We saved a boy's life and kicked a demon in the can besides. That's a good night's work by anybody's standards. Lighten up."

"I've got to get back to my Sector House," he said, not sure if it was the right thing to say, but having to say something. "Better get this shoulder fixed."

"Sector House 12, right?" Anderson said, keying in her own ignition code and activating her bike. "That's why I came after you. I'm coming with you. Just got a call from Central Dispatch. There's been a suspicious death in custody there and they want a Psi-Judge to help with the investigation. Smile, Whitby. The good news is, it looks like you're going to be having the pleasure of my company a little while longer."

"They've called in a Psi-Judge?" SJS Judge Vernon Hass's voice was aghast with outrage. "They can't do that; this is *my* investigation."

Hass was seated at his desk inside the converted storage room that had served as his makeshift office at Sector House 12 for the past two weeks, a secure channel to SJS headquarters open on his comms terminal and the face of his supervisor Judge Myers flickering with the occasional static burst on the screen before him. When the terminal had registered an incoming call from Myers a minute earlier, Hass had known bad news was in the offing, only to learn that what Myers had to say was even worse than he had imagined.

"You have any complaints, you'll have to take them up with Sector Chief Franklin," Myers shrugged. "The old man went over your head and called in

some favours. Looks like he's still got some juice left at the Grand Hall of Justice. More than we gave him credit for, anyway."

"But you told me Franklin was a dinosaur." Hass fumed. "A tired old man, you said. How could he-"

"Even dinosaurs have their contacts, Hass," Myers said. "Back in the Jurassic it seems Franklin served with a young Street Judge named Ramos."

"Ramos?" Hass said. "You mean *the* Judge Ramos? Head of Street Division and a member of the Council of Five?"

"One and the same. Apparently, Franklin called Ramos an hour ago to complain about the slow pace of your investigation. Of course, it didn't help that you've been on the case for nearly two weeks with nothing to show for it. Franklin suggested that bringing in some outside assistance might help speed things along. Ramos agreed. He called Shenker at Psi Division and between the two of them they decided to assign a heavy hitter to the case. Psi-Judge Cassandra Anderson. And yes, Hass, before you ask, that's *the* Judge Anderson."

"But I still don't see how they can get away with this," Hass sulked. "We're SJS. We're supposed to be autonomous."

"Politics, Hass," Myers said. "We can't afford to fight a turf war over this, not with the heads of two separate divisions involved and with one of them being a Council member to boot. Could be Ramos and Shenker are looking to get into a pissing contest with SJS and they're just using this business as an excuse." His voice grew hard. "Either way, I should tell you Judge Buell isn't happy."

"Judge Buell?" Hass said weakly. Even the thought he had somehow earned the displeasure of the head of SJS was enough to give him a shiver. "You've spoken to him?"

"Fifteen minutes ago," Myers said. "He told me to tell you that given your upward career trajectory to date, he has every faith you will handle this situation with sensitivity and dispatch in the best traditions of the SJS. And you know what that means. Solve this case, Hass. Myers, out."

The screen went black as Myers severed the connection. Reeling from the news, Hass sat in brooding silence and stared at the blank screen, his mind replaying the course of their conversation for the meanings hidden within the words. Most of all, he brooded on the message Myers had relayed from Judge Buell. "Upward career trajectory," Judge Buell had said. "Every faith." "Sensitivity and dispatch." "The best traditions of the SJS."

Translation: continue your own investigation and don't cooperate with Anderson any more than you have to. Stonewall her. Make her life difficult. Withhold information if need be. Above all else, don't let her solve the case before you. No matter what else happens, you have to be the one who brings in the perps. If not, we'll bust you out of SJS and make sure you end up as a Street Judge in the worst sector we can find. And you know what happens to SJS Judges who get bounced into Street Division, don't you, Hass?

It's a nightmare, he thought, as he saw a light blinking on his terminal indicating an incoming message. This entire case has had "career-breaker" written all over it right from the beginning.

"Hass here," he said, tapping a key on the comms-terminal and doing his best to compose himself as a new face appeared on the screen. It was Scranton, C Watch duty manager of the Sector House's Check-In Area. "What can I do for you, Judge Scranton?"

"This is a courtesy call, Hass," Scranton said frostily, his expression anything but courteous. "Psi-Judge Anderson just checked in on-site. Apparently she's been assigned to investigate the prisoner deaths."

"I see," Hass said, smoothly adopting his best bureaucratic manner. "I'm very busy at the moment. Have her directed to the waiting area and tell her I'll be with her as soon as possible."

"You're too late," Scranton said. "Anderson said she wanted to get started ASAP, so I sent her down to the holding pens to see Chief Sykes. I knew you wouldn't mind," he added, his tone indicating he knew precisely the opposite was true. "Scranton out."

The screen went black, leaving Hass fuming. He stood and made for the door, pausing only to glance at his reflection in the screen of the comms-terminal. As ever, the sight of himself in the forbidding colours and skull-headed insignia of the SJS uniform served to stiffen his resolve.

I'm SJS, he thought. The Special Judicial Squad. We judge the Judges. We can break anyone, even a legend like Anderson. It occurred to him that perhaps the fact that another Judge had been assigned to his case was not such a bad thing after all. There might even be an advantage to it. The case was a career-breaker. It had been that way from the very beginning. Now though, if there was a career to be broken, it would no longer necessarily have to be his.

FOUR

A MESSAGE IN BLOOD

"All right," said Anderson. "Tell me how it happened. From the beginning."

"It's all in the report," Chief Warder Sykes said. They were standing outside the open door of Holding Cube Two-Thirteen where Leland Barclay died. "Everything that happened. You can be sure we didn't leave anything out."

"Humour me," Anderson said, smiling to try to put the man at his ease. "I just want to find out what happened."

"You're the psychic, Anderson, why don't you tell us?" The chief warder was stone-faced.

A hard case, thought Anderson. And he doesn't like having strangers on his turf.

"It doesn't work that way," she told him. "First, I need you to go through the sequence of events for me so I can get them straight." She nodded towards the holding cube. "Then, I'll go in there and try to scan the room. But for the scan to be of any use to us, I need to have some kind of idea of the context."

Grimacing, Sykes looked at her as though considering a decision. "There was a power cut affecting the entire Sector House," he said. "The Teks say an EM surge caused it, though they also say they can't tell where it came from. It knocked out the surveillance cameras, door locks, and everything else down here. The emergency lights came on, but after about a minute they went out too. Then, we heard screaming from Cube Two-Thirteen. Leland Barclay, sentenced to eighteen years for an ARV. We used crowbars to force the cube door open, but it was too late. Barclay was dead. Burned to death in his cell, just like the others."

"This wasn't the first killing?" Anderson asked.

"That's right," Sykes said. "There have been five others over the last two weeks. Every time the pattern's the same. The power cuts, then screams and finally, a toasted perp in one of the holding cubes. SJS sent one of their men in after the second death. Hass, his name is, but he hasn't found anything wrong down here. I run a tight ship."

"Nothing wrong except the fact six men are dead," Anderson thought aloud, and as soon as she had she realised she had made a mistake.

"You think I don't know that?" Sykes growled. "I'm a twenty-five year man, Anderson. You think I don't know Justice Department are looking for somebody to blame? But I told you: I run a tight ship. I followed procedure on this all the way. So did my men. Whatever in the name of Grud is going on down here, we didn't have anything to do with it."

"Nobody's saying you did, chief," Anderson tried to be soothing. "The way I see it, we both want the same things. We want to find out the truth about what's been going on. Right?"

"Right." Sykes's tone was grudging.

"All the same, I get the feeling there's something you haven't told me," she said, looking from Sykes to the faces of the men around her long enough to see them shift uneasily beneath her gaze. "You don't have to be psychic to know there's something else."

"It's all in the report, Anderson." Sykes paused with a look of discomfort. "When we broke into the cube there was something written on the wall. The word 'Judged', written in blood. Then..." he paused again, his discomfort seeming to grow. "We all saw it, Anderson. All of us. We saw the word 'Judged' written on that cube wall as clear as I can see you now. Then, some time between the discovery of the body and the arrival of the Tek-Judges' forensics team, the word disappeared."

"Disappeared? You mean someone erased it?"

"That's exactly what I *don't* mean." The chief warder's tone was forceful. "Forensics couldn't find any trace of blood on the wall, or for that matter any sign of writing. It was like the word had never been there, but it *was*, Anderson. Or it had been. We all saw it. Same as the other times."

"The same?" Anderson said, glancing at the faces of the rest of the warders and seeing agreement there. "You mean with all the other killings, you saw this same word written there each time?"

"That's right," Sykes said. "Exactly the same. And every time it had disappeared by the time the forensics boys came to do their analysis."

Digesting all she had heard, Anderson became aware that Sykes and his men were looking at her intently. Their faces were expectant; it was as though they were waiting for her to conjure an answer out of thin air like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. She was accustomed to such looks; for a Psi-Judge it went with the territory. Centuries might have passed since

people with her abilities were routinely burned at the stake, but there was no diminishing the aura of mystery surrounding psychic powers in the minds of non-psychics. From experience, she knew that mystery was a sword that could cut two ways. On one hand, it caused people to shy away from her, afraid of what she might see of their true faces beneath the masks they wore to confront the world. On the other, when they needed help they would turn to her with all the desperate faith of religious believers expecting miracles. And when you couldn't give them their miracles, sometimes the believers could turn ugly.

"Thanks," she said. "I figure that should give me enough to go on. If I need anything else, or I learn anything of use, I'll call you."

Disappointed, the Judges began to drift away to return to their duties. All except Chief Warder Sykes. Arms crossed, face set in a determined line, he stood staring at Anderson. Waiting.

"No offence, chief," Anderson said, "but the last thing I need is an audience watching me when I go in to scan the cube, even an audience of one. It can interfere with the process."

"You will tell me what comes out of the scan," Sykes said. It was a demand, not a question.

"You'll be the first to know if I make any progress, chief," Anderson said. Strictly speaking, a chief warder had no right to demand anything of a Psi-Judge, but she could see no reason to make an issue of it. "You needn't have any worries on that account."

"All right then." Sykes seemed satisfied. "If you have any news, I'll be in the Custody Command Room."

A hard case all right, Anderson thought, watching the chief warder leave. Tough. Sure of himself. Follows the regs to the letter, I bet. I can't see him being the killer. Enough foreplay, guess I'd better get to work.

She entered the cube. The smell was the first thing that struck her. The odour of burnt human flesh; after you smelt it once you could never forget it. She noticed dark marks on the walls. Smoke residue, she thought. And those yellow-brown streaks are bits of fat that spat sizzling from the man as he burned. A horrible way to die. There was a chalk outline drawn on the bunk where the body had been found, small holes left in the blanket where sample pieces had been cut out and sent for analysis, fingerprint powder dusted on the cube's fixtures and fittings - the residues of a dozen different

forensics procedures. Apparently, the Tek-Judges had turned up little in the way of evidence that might crack the case. Now, it was her turn.

Moving to the centre of the limited floor space of the cube, she stood facing the bunk where Leland Barclay had died. Finding the stench of burned flesh in the air to be a distraction, she unclipped one of the pouches on her belt and pulled a small plasteen tub from it. "Rub-U-Want Unguent", the label read. "For Relieving Tired and Aching Muscles. Now with Synthi-Menthol Freshness!" Applying a generous helping of the gel from the tube to her top lip, she breathed in deeply, letting the cloying menthol scent clear her nostrils of the more gruesome odours of the cube. Then, replacing the unguent tube back into the pouch once more, she closed her eyes.

Get ready, Cass, she thought. A man burned to death here. This is going to be a bad one.

She breathed in deeply once more, letting the air ease in and out of her with the rise and fall of her lungs. Slowly, easily, like a tide washing gently against the shore, in and out. She let her breathing find its own rhythm as she opened herself to the psi-flux, all the while knowing she stood on the brink of experiencing every pain and horror Leland Barclay had felt as he died. She did not turn away from it. There was no protection for psi scanning a murder scene - it was all or nothing. She had to be ready to endure everything the victim had endured: there was no way to hold back the tide once it was unleashed. But she was ready. She had done this before. At times it seemed as though she had felt the pain of this entire city. She was a Psi-Judge and it was part of her job.

Breathing. Slowly. In and out. Rhythm. Her heart a metronome. Her mind an unblinking, all-seeing eye. She went to the place beyond rational thought, where the conscious and unconscious met. She opened herself fully to the psi-flux, lowering her defences, and waited for the pain to begin as the first tidal wave of sensation flowed through her. She waited and felt...

Nothing.

She felt nothing. No pain, no agony, no fear or terror. There was nothing there at all; it was as though the cube was no more than the collection of the physical objects inside it. Four walls. A floor. A ceiling. A bunk. A sink. A shower. A toilet. There was no sign of the other world. The psi-world. No psychic signatures. No imprints. No emotion. No thoughts. No evidence that any living thing had ever stepped inside it.

She felt nothing.

It was as though she was surrounded on every side by a blank space. As though she stood in the middle of a black hole in the middle of the psi-flux. Like she had abruptly been rendered blind and deaf, the senses she had relied upon her entire life were suddenly gone.

She felt nothing. And, with it, a new understanding grew cold and chill inside her heart.

Something was terribly wrong here.

"So you're telling us you found nothing?" Sector Chief Franklin said from his chair, his expression betraying his disappointment.

It was three quarters of an hour later, and Judge Hass had been busy. Emerging from the holding pens after conferring with Chief Warder Sykes, Anderson was summoned to an impromptu meeting in the SJS man's office to discuss her progress. Given the imperious nature of the summons, and the fact she harboured little in the way of kind feeling toward SJS, she had been tempted to send a message back telling Hass to go drokk himself. In the end it was a question of protocol. Strictly speaking, she had come to Sector House 12 to assist in Hass's investigation; the fact she was sure he would try and stonewall her in the usual SJS fashion was neither here nor there. Besides, Hass had made it clear Sector Chief Franklin and the Deputy Sector Chief Grimes would be attending the meeting.

Anderson might not have been a particularly political animal - few Psi-Judges were - but even she knew better than to snub the Sector House command structure within an hour of her arrival. Still, political animal or not, her presence at the meeting had since given her more insights than she ever could have wished into local Sector House politics.

"Not altogether the result we might have hoped for, then," Deputy Chief Grimes ventured his opinion from the chair beside Franklin. It was clear the two of them had a frosty relationship: every word from the Deputy Chief's mouth seemed full of subtle antagonism towards his superior. Pushed aside for promotion most probably, Anderson thought, sensing spite and agitation beneath Grimes's calm exterior. Psi Division said Franklin is due to be replaced as Sector Chief by Meryl Coolidge over at Sector One-Sixty. Grimes was probably hoping he'd get the job himself.

"Still, he shouldn't let ourselves become too disappointed," Grimes continued, nodding smoothly towards Franklin and making a show of patronising the older man as though he thought he was half-senile already.

"Judge Anderson's investigation is barely an hour old, after all. They say justice wasn't built in a day."

"Indeed," Hass said, holding his hands splayed with fingertips touching in front of him. "Though, of course, methods of psychic investigation are notoriously unreliable. Not that I mean to impugn Judge Anderson's efforts in any way, you understand. Her reputation speaks for itself." His smile was of a cold, dead thing, dripping with venom.

He's typical SJS, all right, Anderson thought. Where do they find these guys? Under a rock? Or is there some secret cloning machine at SJS headquarters that turns them out by the dozen?

"The Dark Judges Incursions, the Apocalypse War, the Necropolis Event," Hass said, the smile fixed to his face. "Time and again, Judge Anderson has acted above and beyond the call of duty to protect Mega-City One. It would not perhaps be too much of an exaggeration to say, on occasion, she has performed miracles on our behalf. Of course, the *problem* with miracles is that in the end we begin to expect them every time. We forget, Psi-Judge or not, that for all her not-inconsiderable gifts even Judge Anderson is only human."

Hass paused as though waiting for her comeback, until apparently convinced she had ceded the floor to him indefinitely, he began again.

"And besides, another Psi-Judge has already scanned one of the previous crime scenes with no greater degree of success," he said, a hint of triumph in the smile now. "After the third murder I called in Psi-Judge Manley to ascertain whether there was any sign of pyrokine activity at the scene. He found none, confirming my thesis that the burnings were achieved by some form of technological means that has yet to be detected. You see there is clearly-"

"Uh-huh," Anderson interrupted him. "I'd love nothing better than to hear your theories, Hass, but we seem to have had some kind of communications breakdown about what I found when I scanned the crime scene."

"You said you found nothing," Chief Franklin leaned forward eagerly.

"That's right," Anderson said. "I found nothing. No psychic impressions, no residual memories, no lingering pain, fear, horror, or any other emotion. Zero. Zip. Zilch. Nada. Bupkis. It's like the entire cube was a blank slate, and that's something that shouldn't happen."

"Really? I think you are being too hard on yourself, Anderson," Hass interjected as smooth and oily as a snake as he tried to steer the

conversation back to the course he had originally set. "As I said, you are only human-"

"Oops. There's that communications breakdown again," Anderson smiled at him, chiding herself inwardly for the glee she felt at the way Hass seemed to develop a slight facial tic every time she interrupted him. "Let me put it to you this way: you have some perp sitting at home somewhere trying to make himself a bomb. He mixes the ingredients wrong and the whole thing goes *boom*. When you get to the crime scene, what do you expect to find?"

"I fail to see the point of this." Hass shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Humour me, Hass," Anderson told him. "Trust me, you'll get the point, soon enough."

"Very well." Hass pursed his lips in annoyance. "It would depend, of course, on the precise size of the explosion and the environment in which it happened. Generally, I would expect to see explosive debris, a bomb crater, human remains-"

"Exactly," Anderson said, noticing the SJS man's tic was growing more pronounced. "But the one thing you wouldn't expect to see is an empty room with no sign there had ever been an explosion there at all."

"I'm not sure I see what you're getting at," Franklin said, all three of them looking at her now.

"What I mean is, when things happen in the physical world you see evidence that they've happened. It's the same with the psychic world. As living creatures we leave a psychic imprint on our surroundings. We can't help it. When a man dies violently, burning to death alone in a confined space with no one to help him, that imprint should be all the stronger. So strong that, for months afterwards, any psychic going into the room would feel like it was happening to him - like he was drowning in the dead man's pain. But not in this case. Somehow, the cube where Leland Barclay died was devoid of any impression. It felt like no one had even ever been in the room, much less that a man had died there only a couple of hours earlier. The entire room felt blank, and believe me when I tell you there's no way that should even be possible."

She let her words sink in. She could see realisation dawning on the faces of Grimes and Franklin, even as Hass's expression stayed stubbornly tight.

"That's not all," she said. "After I tried to scan Barclay's cube, I had Chief Sykes take me to the cubes where the other perps died and it was the same

in every one. All I could detect were the psychic impressions of the other perps who had been inside the cubes since the deaths. There was nothing left of the men who had died inside the cubes. Somehow, six men burned to death in screaming agony without it leaving any psychic impression whatsoever on their surroundings. You can take it from me that's just plain *spooky*."

"Spooky?" Hass's tone was barbed. "This is a murder investigation, Anderson, not some damned Tri-D ghost story. You'll be telling us next you give credence to Sykes and his claims of bloody messages appearing and disappearing on walls."

"I take it you don't?" she said.

"Of course not," Hass snorted, the subtle sniping of moments earlier now giving way to cold fury. "The whole thing is absurd. Messages in blood that leave no forensic trace behind? It's nothing more than a case of mass hysteria. Frankly, the fact that you would bring it up at all shows remarkably poor judge-"

The lights went off. Plunged into darkness, they heard the sound of a distant gunshot and screaming coming from somewhere outside. Running to the door with the others close behind her, Anderson opened it to see bedlam in the corridor. In the dim blue glow of the Sector House's emergency lights she saw a group of Judges desperately trying to disarm a middle-aged Judge, while nearby part of the corridor's walls had caught fire.

"No," the struggling Judge shrieked as the other Judges grappled for his Lawgiver. "You can't stop me, I have sinned. I must be judged!"

The restraining strap loosened in the scuffle, his helmet fell away to reveal a creased and weathered face now given over to screaming madness. Drawing her Lawgiver as she hurried closer, Anderson caught a glimpse of the name on the man's badge through the press of bodies. Brophy. One of the Judges behind Brophy brought his daystick down on the back of the man's head with a sickening crunch. Eyes rolling back white in their sockets, his hand slackening to release the grip of his Lawgiver, Brophy collapsed.

"What in the name of hell is going on here?" she heard Sector Chief Franklin roaring.

"It was Judge Brophy, chief," one of the Judges said, standing to attention. "I've never seen anything like it. He just seemed to go crazy,

started raving about sin and damnation. Then he tried to set himself alight with the incendiaries from his own Lawgiver."

The lights came back on, flooding the corridor with their glare. With it, the fire control system went back on-line, triggering the sprinklers in the ceiling to begin dousing the corridor in water. While others saw to fighting the fire or securing Brophy, Anderson noticed that the Judge who had struck him was still standing in the same place, looking uncertainly down at the blood dripping from the end of his daystick. It was Whitby. He seemed to be in shock.

"Looks like the speedheal's worked its usual miracles, then?" she said, trying to break him out of it. "That shoulder doesn't seem to be giving you any more trouble."

"Anderson?" he looked at her dully. "You saw I had to do it. It was like he went futsie..."

"Put out that fire." She heard the sector chief's voice again, snapping orders. "Have Judge Brophy taken to med-bay in restraints. And, somebody, turn off those damn sprinklers. I want the preliminary reports on this incident on my desk inside an hour-"

"Sweet Grud," Grimes said. "The wall, look at the wall."

Turning with the others, Anderson followed the line of Grimes's pointing finger and saw it. There was a message in jagged letters written on the corridor wall in what appeared to be blood.

"Psi-bitch", the message read. "This house is mine. Leave it or you too will be judged".

"It's just like Chief Sykes said," Grimes's whispered. "Just like the deaths in the holding cubes. A message written in blood..." Grimes looked at Anderson. "Psi-bitch? No offence, Anderson, but I think he's talking to you."

"Yeah, and he's not being too polite about it, either," she replied. Then, noticing Hass standing among the group gazing at the message on the wall, she winked jauntily and gave him a sarcastic smile.

"Mass hysteria, huh?" she said, nodding towards the unconscious body of Judge Brophy as it was carried away to med-bay. "Guess that means we must all be as crazy as he is."

FIVE

SILENT CADAVERS

"Leland Eric Barclay," Med-Judge Henderson said, pulling open a long metal drawer to reveal the damaged and ruined features of a fire-blackened corpse. "Male. Age: thirty-four. Cause of death... Well, why don't we make this one interesting? See if you can work it out for yourself."

They were alone in the Sector House morgue. Standing on the opposite side of the drawer from the young Med-Judge, Anderson looked at his smiling face and could see he wasn't joking. It had been a long night. First, there had been the Durand kidnapping, the frantic search through the Undercity and the demon. Then, there had been the holding cubes, the meeting with Hass, the Brophy incident and the bloody writing on the wall. Right now, the last thing she wanted to do was play twenty questions with a ghoulish morgue attendant who was so starved of human company he thought guessing causes of death was some kind of parlour game. But if she wanted Henderson to help her, it looked like she was going to have to play it his way.

Guess he doesn't get too many women down here, she thought, sighing inwardly. Probably thinks this is what passes for flirtation in the outside world.

"Smoke inhalation?" she said, wondering if Henderson made all the sector's Judges go through the same rigmarole when they wanted answers.

"Bee-Beep!" Henderson buzzed, imitating the sound contestants heard on the Tri-D gameshow *Wheel of Credits* when they gave the wrong answer. "You'd think so, wouldn't you? It's certainly the usual cause of death when a victim dies in a fire, and I bet our friend Barclay here only wishes he'd had it so easy. You want to try again? Double or nothing?"

"Why don't you just tell me, Henderson," she said, growing tired of the game already. "Blind me with science."

"Oh, okay," he said, peering closely at Anderson for a moment as though trying to decide whether she was being sarcastic. "Well, as I say, when a victim dies in a fire, usually you'd expect the smoke to suffocate them before the fire can kill them. Or, they breathe in superheated air, causing their throat to blister and swell up, with the same result - suffocation. Not Barclay. He literally burned to death. See this hole here?" Henderson

pointed to Barclay's blackened ribs peeking out through the mess of his chest. "Fire burnt right through into the chest cavity. Turned his heart into a lump of charcoal. Of course, the post mortem report gives the cause of death as hypoxia. Oxygen starvation. The heart getting torched stopped his blood from flowing and caused his brain to shut down through lack of oxygen, but that's just semantics. The poor bastard burned to death, pure and simple."

Henderson fell silent as he stared down at the corpse in sober reflection. "I always figured that's got to be one of the worst ways to die," he said. "Burning to death. You feel every moment of it. Or at least you do until the fire burns away the nerves in your skin and you can't feel anything anymore. Even then, if you're conscious you still know what's happening. You can smell your flesh burning, hear the sizzle as the fat on your body cracks and pops. Human crackling. Grud, but that's a bad way to go."

"What about the cause of the fire?" Anderson asked. "What do we have on that?"

"Now that's a bit of a puzzle." His sombre mood evaporating, Henderson looked towards her and arched his eyebrows. "You get a human body hot enough it'll burn just like a candle. But Forensics haven't found any trace of accelerants or fuels that might have started the fire. Nor are there the type of burn patterns you'd expect if someone had used a plasma weapon, microwave emitter, broadbeam laser, or any kind of heat ray. It's a mystery. I hear the boys in Tek-Bay are really scratching their heads over this one."

"What about you?" Anderson said. "You got any theories?"

"Theories?" He adopted a comically irate manner as he attempted to do an impression of one of the characters from the cult Tri-D show, *Hell Trek*. "Dammit, Jim! I'm a doctor, not a theoretician!"

Guess that answers the question of what Henderson does down here when he's not cutting up corpses, Anderson thought. Looks like he watches a lot of bad Tri-D.

"We're talking about murders, Henderson," she reminded him. "Six of them so far. People are dying."

"Uh... right," Henderson replied, crestfallen that she did not share his sense of humour. "Well, we can rule out spontaneous combustion. Sponcoms always start inside the body and burn outward, while the fire that killed Barclay started outside and burned its way in. Of course, it could be the work of a pyrokinetic."

"You think so?" Anderson asked. "SJS Hass already had a Psi-Judge scan for pyrokine activity and came up empty."

"Nah, not really," Henderson shrugged. "The thing is, there aren't really any forensic signs specifically associated with a pyrokine attack. It's more like a diagnosis by default. You know, you can't find any other evidence of how a fire started - a pyrokine must have done it. But in this case it's pretty unlikely. Barclay was alone in a locked room, the surveillance cameras were out and the observation-port in the holding cube door was closed. There wasn't even anybody in the corridor outside when the attack started. And pyrokines, like most psychics, usually need a clear line-of-sight to their target."

"There are ways around that, though," Anderson said. "If the pyrokine was already mind-linked with the victim, or had given him some kind of focus-"

"The focus idea is definitely out." Henderson shook his head. "Remember, Barclay was in a holding cube - they would have taken all his personal property off him in Processing. It could be a mind-link, or a really powerful pyrokine who's learned how to get by without line-of-sight. But we come back to the same problem: Hass had a scan done for pyrokines and didn't find anything. Then there's the fact there was no collateral burn damage to Barclay's clothes and surroundings." He shrugged. "I don't know. I've looked at it every way I can think of, without even getting close to coming up with an answer."

He pursed his lips as he looked at the body. Long seconds passed as the two of them stared at the corpse. Looking at the burnt and tortured flesh of what had once been a man, Anderson found herself frustrated. She had come to the morgue in hope of answers, but there were none. Only more questions.

"One strange thing," Henderson said. "When the body came in, it was in foetal position. That's not unusual in deaths by fire: if they can't escape the flames, victims tend to adopt the foetal position as a way of trying to protect themselves. Then, when I tried to straighten the body out so I could perform the autopsy, I found the limbs were in rigor mortis. This isn't unusual in itself: the heat of the fire causes the muscles of the victim's body to clench, inducing a premature state of rigor. But what *was* unusual - and, between you and me, I can't even begin to explain it - is that Barclay's muscles had been so badly damaged by the fire that there should have been no way they

could have sustained a state of rigor. Look at him for yourself, and you'll see there's little more left of his arms than scorched bone and charcoal. Yet, somehow, even with no muscles left, those arms were so strongly clenched around his body I had to break the elbow joints to open them. It's a physical impossibility, but that's exactly what happened. Look in the autopsy notes if you don't believe me."

"I believe you," Anderson said. "Right now this whole case makes so little sense, I wouldn't say that anything's impossible."

She looked closely at Leland Barclay, trying to read something in the open-mouthed expression of agony he had taken with him to death. For a moment she was tempted to put out her hand and lay it on his forehead to try to scan him, but that would come later. She was hunting a killer, and if she was going to build a picture of who that was, it was better to follow a certain order of things. Which meant first of all that she wanted to see the rest of his victims.

"All right," she said to Henderson at last. "So that's Leland Barclay. Now let me see the others."

Eugene Detwiler. Bartley Gribbs. Evan McShane. Montgomery Wheatley. Reynaldo Wu. One by one, Henderson showed her the bodies. In each case, the particulars were the same: the same cause of death, the same fire-ravaged corpses, the same scorched and damaged faces with features permanently set in a silent rictus scream. And with each body, the same unanswered questions.

"Thanks for your help, Henderson," she said after he had showed her the last one. "I'd appreciate it if you'd leave the drawers open and give me some time alone with them. I'm going to try to do a scan."

Standing beside one of the bodies as she heard Henderson's footfalls recede behind her, Anderson breathed in deeply and removed her gloves to lay her hands across the man's forehead. Courtesy of the refrigeration systems hidden inside the morgue drawer, the sensation of the cold clammy flesh beneath her palms was enough to make her shiver. Worse, she could feel small pieces of burnt flesh breaking off to adhere to her hands. Grud, wish I could've left my gloves on for this, she thought, but she cast the thought aside. She had a job to do. She was a Psi-Judge and she was hunting a killer. Squeamishness was not an option.

She breathed deeply, in and out, letting her own body set the rhythms of the trance. Her heart. Her lungs. Her blood. Her pulse. Retreating to a quiet place deep inside herself, she opened to the psi-flux and waited for the rush of sensations as she tried to connect to the memories and emotions still lingering in the cold flesh before her. She waited and felt...

Nothing.

Confused, she opened her eyes. It was the same as earlier when she had tried to scan the cube where Leland Barclay had died. The corpse felt blank. Empty. There were no residual memories. No emotions. No thoughts. No sign whatsoever that what was now dead flesh had ever once been a living man.

For a moment she wondered if there was something wrong with her powers. As quickly as the thought occurred to her, she dismissed it. She could feel her psychic senses operating just as they always had. She had felt the undercurrents of animosity during the meeting with Hass, Grimes and Franklin. She had felt the panic in the corridor outside the meeting when Brophy went crazy. She had felt Henderson's awkward lust towards her. No, there was nothing wrong with her powers. But if there was nothing wrong with them, then that meant...

Moving to each of the bodies in turn, she tried to scan them one by one. The result was the same. Nothing. At last, calling an end to her fruitless labours, she shivered, not with the cold this time, but at a thought that came to her. Six bodies and six murder scenes, all of them psychically blank and empty. Whoever, or *whatever*, was at work in Sector House 12 had done something far worse than simply kill these men. It was as though it had annihilated them, leaving their cold dead bodies behind but otherwise scouring away every trace of their existence. Thoughts. Memories. Emotions. Six bodies, and it was like there was nothing left of the men they belonged to, nothing but burnt, empty shells.

It was monstrous. She realised there was something she had been putting off for some time, hoping that if she found the answer in the morgue she might never need to do it. An obvious task she had been avoiding. The bodies in the morgue could tell her nothing. She had spent her time with the dead when there was still a living victim who might be able to answer her questions and tell her everything she needed to know.

Brophy.

She could not put it off any longer. If she was going to find the answers she was seeking, it looked as though she was going to have to journey into the mind of a madman.

SIX

THE SINS OF WILLIAM BROPHY

It's just not possible, Vernon Hass thought as he sat brooding at his desk. There is no conceivable way it could have happened.

He had just received the forensics report on the bloody writing that had appeared in the wake of Judge Brophy's sudden and spectacular descent into madness. Leafing through the report, Hass found to his dismay that every claim Chief Warder Sykes and his men had made about the earlier messages in the holding cube's walls had been supported. This time Hass had even seen the message on the corridor wall himself.

By the time the first Tek-Judges had arrived on the scene it had disappeared. Worse, forensic analysis of the wall and the residues left there by the sprinkler system showed no sign of any blood, ink, or any other conceivable substance that could have created the red letters seen by more than a dozen witnesses. Nor, despite Hass's most fervent wishes, could the collective testimony of these witnesses - himself included - be explained away as the effect of mass hysteria. The existence of the message had even been recorded on the Sector House's surveillance cameras. Impossibly, somehow the message had appeared and then disappeared without leaving any physical trace. It was a mystery, but if his time in SJS had taught Hass nothing else it was that mysteries were simply unanswered questions. If a man was ambitious and wanted to rise far in SJS as Hass did, he had better find answers quickly.

Perhaps it was a holographic projection of some sort, he thought. I always suspected there was advanced technology at work in these murders. This could simply be more of the same.

He found the thought pleasing. Early in his investigation he had developed the theory that there was a conspiracy at work inside Sector House 12. He had decided the murders in the holding cubes were examples of vigilante justice, meted out by rogue Judges who had become disenchanted with the system they were sworn to uphold. He was sure at least some of the Judge-Warders were in on it, perhaps even Chief Warder Sykes himself. As to why the conspirators had waited until now to begin their killings, the answer was obvious. They were using the fact that Sector House 12 was closing to their advantage, hoping the chaos of the move to

the new Sector House would help them in covering their tracks. So far, Hass had been unable to unearth any hard evidence to support his theory - nor any to even establish the identities of the main conspirators. All the same, he was sure it was solid. Just as he was sure, given enough time, he would eventually crack the case wide open.

Though given recent events, not least the arrival of Judge Anderson, Hass was keenly aware that time was now the one commodity he no longer had.

What about Judge Brophy? he thought, desperately searching for some kind of breakthrough. It's too much of a coincidence that he should have a complete mental breakdown at precisely the same time as a new message appears. Yet he didn't burn to death - he tried to set himself alight. It could be he's the key to all this.

Discarding the forensics report, Hass turned to his computer terminal and tapped in his access code to connect to the SJS database. He typed in Brophy's name and badge number and skimmed through his service record.

Judge William Patrick Brophy. Street Division. Badge Number: 3948-8039-49398-A-56/3. DOB: 3/4/2072. Graduated Academy of Law: 10/6/2087. Current Posting Since 15/9/2106: Street Patrol, Sector House 12.

Checking the attached psych-reports and finding no sign of any previous incidents of instability, Hass brought up Brophy's secret SJS file from the restricted access archive. The file showed that Brophy had been reported for using excessive force on three separate occasions over the last ten years. He had never been convicted, but as far as Hass was concerned, three complaints for the same offence constituted a pattern.

So, he thought, Brophy likes to use his daystick to administer a little pedway payback to perps when he thinks no one is looking. He probably tells himself the system is too soft and all he's doing is levelling the score. Once a Judge starts thinking like that, it's easy to take things too far. The vigilante habit is hard to break, never mind the other crimes you have to commit to cover up your excesses. If Brophy hadn't been a victim of whatever it is that's going on in the Sector House, he'd have fit the profile for a member of the conspiracy perfectly.

Unless...

It hit him in a blinding flash of inspiration. All along, he had been thinking of Brophy as a victim. What if he had been a member of the conspiracy?

It would make sense, he thought. Brophy fits the profile. He likes to hurt perps. He could have been in on it from the very beginning. But then maybe he starts to think the whole thing has gone too far - especially once SJS comes in on the case. Maybe he threatened to turn the others in if they didn't stop what they were doing. Maybe what happened in the corridor earlier wasn't a case of Brophy having a psychotic episode at all. Instead, maybe it was all about a group of rogue Judges trying to silence one of their own by making it look like he'd gone futsie.

It was an elegant theory, made all the more attractive because it fit Hass's needs. If a murderous cabal of rogue Judges was at work in Sector House 12 and Hass could expose them, his future career progression would be assured. The case that had started out as a career breaker would become a career maker, a case that would elevate him to being one of the best and brightest in SJS; a star in the making.

It fits, he thought. The whole thing fits. The best place to start looking for the members of the conspiracy would be among the other Judges on the scene when Brophy suffered his breakdown.

Happily, Hass had already summoned one of the Judges to see him. Granted, he had sent out the summons simply because the man in question had recently served with Anderson, and Hass liked to spy on his enemies as a matter of routine. It seemed he had inadvertently put himself in the position to kill two birds with a single stone.

There was a knock at the door and the sound of a voice on the other side tentatively asking for permission to enter. Waiting a moment before he answered, Hass looked at his reflection in the computer screen as he smoothed his uniform and checked the calibre of his smile. Yes, he thought, looking at his face reflected in the screen. That's the right one: a quiet smile with just a hint of intimidation.

"Come in," he said, making sure his voice was loud, clear and commanding.

The door opened and Judge Whitby entered. He looked tired, his features drawn and haggard, his expression uncertain.

Perfect, thought Hass.

"Ah, Judge Whitby," he said. "Good of you to respond so promptly. Please, take a seat. Though, first, if you would be so kind as to hand over your Lawgiver, boot knife and daystick."

"You want my weapons?" Whitby was shocked.

"Nothing to be concerned about," Hass smiled at him. Bending down to retrieve a briefcase-sized plasteen gunsafe from beside his desk, Hass opened it and indicated Whitby should place his weapons inside. "Standard procedure, I'm afraid. It's all in the regs. Sub-section nine of paragraph two on page two-six-five. ′All suspects are to be disarmed preceding interrogation', quote unquote. Still, you can keep your badge," he paused, letting the words hang in the air an instant before he twisted the knife. "For now."

"I'm a suspect?" Whitby said, complying with Hass's instructions with an expression of dull confusion. "What am I being accused of?"

"All in good time." Closing and locking the cover of the gunsafe, Hass removed it from his desk once more. "Sit down," he said, producing a voice recorder and a portable lie detector from a drawer and making an ostentatious show of activating them. "Now, if you would be so kind as to state your name and badge number. Just for the record, you understand."

"Judge Kelland Alexander Whitby," Whitby's voice was hoarse as though his mouth had gone dry. "Badge Number: 7906-4930-93820-G-74/9."

"Very good," Hass said, careful not to spoil the moment by glancing at his reflection again. "Now, why don't you start by telling me all you know about Judge William Brophy?"

"He's catatonic," Med-Chief Rodriguez shrugged. "Has been ever since they brought him in. Apparently Sector Chief Franklin and SJS Judge Hass both want to question him, but there's not much we can do about it when he's in this state."

Compared to the unsettling silence of the morgue, the med-bay on level six seemed full of vibrant life. Standing by the bed where Judge Brophy lay staring blankly into space, Anderson could hear dozens of competing sounds as around her the med-staff administered to a ward full of patients. The rhythmic hiss of respirators, the wet *whoosh* of flushing water as auto-bedpans emptied themselves, the clatter of trolley wheels as a med-auxiliary did her rounds and dispensed medication; together, the universal reassuring noises of medical facilities the world over. Meanwhile, on the other side of the bed, Med-Chief Rodriguez absently hummed a few bars of a familiar tune as he wrote something on the medical chart.

"Skull fracture and associated haematoma," he said at last. "Somebody hit him on the head, and *hard*. It was touch and go when they brought him

in, but he's stable now. Magitron dealt with the skull fracture and the worst of the brain swelling. We've administered a course of gene-modified viral healers to help deal with the rest. Other than the head wound, there was no sign of any pre-existing organic damage. We screened for toxins, narcotics, hallucinogens, heavy metals, vitamin deficiencies, bacterials, viruses, prions, you name it; all negative. Whatever caused his breakdown, it wasn't biological. Looks like it's a psych-job now."

"A *psi*-job," she corrected him quietly.

"Really?" Rodriguez looked at her in surprise. "You're going into his head? Not trying to tell you your business, Anderson, but isn't that kind of dangerous? I understand there can be problems in these cases."

"You mean aren't I risking going as crazy as he is?" she said. "Sure, it's a risk. Performing a deepscan on an insane mind can be a traumatic experience. Worse, when you get that close and personal to madness it can be contagious. I could come back raving about sin and damnation like Brophy here was a few hours ago, or I could end up catatonic like he is now. Then again, it can play on the flaws in the psychic's own psyche, triggering a completely different kind of breakdown. I could become phobic, an obsessive-compulsive, a kleptomaniac, a spont. Take your pick. I don't have much choice, though. Whatever's going on here, the answers are probably in Brophy's head, and I need to find them." She shrugged and smiled, trying to put a brave face on it. "Guess that's why the Justice Department pays me the big bucks."

"It's your mind, Anderson," Rodriguez sighed. "Though, Grud knows, you wouldn't catch me doing it - even if my brain had the right equipment to begin with. I'm assuming it would make things easier if we moved Brophy off the ward to somewhere more quiet?"

"Yeah, it would," she agreed. "It might be an idea if you had a couple of Med-Judges standing by with some tranqs ready as well. Just in case."

"Tranquillisers? But, I told you, Brophy's catatonic, and he's in restraints. I can't see any situation arising where he'd need sedating."

"Not for him," Anderson said. "For me. Have you ever seen the kind of damage a berserk psychic can cause? Believe me, if this thing ends up going as badly as it could, you'll be glad you took some precautions."

Midday. A blazing summer's sun. Heat haze rising from the plascrete. Lunch at the hottie stand off Ellroy and Leonard. Hotties. Time was he

would have driven right past. Recently, though, he had developed a taste for them.

"There you are, Judge." The girl with blue eyes passed him his meal from behind the counter. "One Long John with all the trimmings." She leaned forward, cleavage pushing her blouse buttons tight. "You sure must like our hotties. You've been coming here nearly every day for a month now."

"It's convenient," he said as he handed over his money. How old was she? Maybe twenty? "This place is just off the meg-way. Means if I get a call from Control I can respond more quickly."

"I never would have thought of that." She smiled, her teeth white and even. He wondered if she saw right through him. "That's pretty clever."

"Old Judge trick." His mouth went dry. He felt stupid. Awkward. "You may have noticed I'm a pretty old Judge."

"Oh, I don't know about that." She smiled again. As she handed the change back to him he felt her fingers brush briefly against his palm through his glove. "You still look to be in good working order to me."

"Hey, Broph." A voice broke the spell.

He turned and saw a Judge pulling his bike into the parking lot behind him. It was Elvins, his one-time rookie.

"When Control said you were on a meal break I knew I'd find you here." Elvins's voice was breathless and eager. "Got a hot tip from an organ legger I just busted. Stookie lab, backroom of the Holovid Hideout on Escobar Plaza. Thought you might want to come along for the ride."

"How many perps?" He dropped his hottie into the bin and made for his bike.

"Could be as many as a dozen. Spits and stump guns. Stoolie says they're mostly lab geeks, though. We roll in there hard we should take 'em, no problem." Elvins's eyes narrowed as they shifted to the hottie stand. "Hey, Broph? Health and safety violation. That extractor vent should have a cover on it."

"I've dealt with it already," he lied. "First-time offender. Used my discretion. Told her to get it fixed and gave her a warning."

"A warning?" Elvins smiled in mock disbelief. "No offence, but you must be getting charitable in your old age, Broph. Not like you to go so easy on a perp."

"Guess maybe I had an ulterior motive," he smiled. As their bikes roared out of the lot he stole a glance behind him. "Place makes good hotties. You

get to be as old as me, you have to learn to take your pleasures where you can find them."

Night. Bettie Bacall Block. He had parked his bike outside the Bogart Con-apt and travelled the rest of the way on foot. He had told Control he was going into a basement in search of a perp and might be off-comm for a while. His second lie of the day. Luckily they didn't ask too many questions.

The hallway outside her apartment was empty. He was glad of it. The last thing he needed was some insomniac citizen nosing around. In his uniform he stood out like a sore thumb. At least there were no surveillance cameras. Lack of block funds meant Bettie Bacall wasn't due a security upgrade for another two years. He had checked it out in the Justice Department database, just to be on the safe side.

Melinda Jayne Holsen. He had checked her out, too. Fifty-third Floor. Apartment fifteen. One conviction. A two-hundred credit fine for Failure To Return A Library-Slug In A Prompt And Timely Manner. Twenty-six years of age. Unmarried. No known dependants. Height: One-hundred and sixty centimetres. Hair: brown. Eyes: blue.

She had blue eyes. Somehow that seemed important.

He reached the apartment. He felt guilty. Nervous. He pulled out his daystick, ready to pound it against the door. Old habits. This wasn't a crime swoop. Embarrassed, he put the daystick away. His hand shook as he rang the bell.

"Just a minute." He heard her voice inside the apartment. "I'm in the shower."

She opened the door wearing a bathrobe. Hair tied up. Skin still wet. He had prepared a story. Reports of a sneak thief operating in the block. Going door-to-door to ask if the residents had seen anything suspicious, but when the moment came he found himself dumbstruck. He swallowed hard, not knowing what to say. He looked into her blue eyes in silence.

"I knew you'd come," she said, a smile lighting up her face. The bathrobe fell open.

Night. Afterwards. Melinda's bedroom. Lying together, facing each other in the darkness. A glimpse of the moon outside through a chink in the curtains.

"An Unjudicial Liaison," he told her. "That's what they call it. If Justice Department found out about this they'd take away my badge."

"You don't want to see me again?" She shifted uneasily and her blue eyes flashed in the moonlight.

"Of course I do," He put his hand to her face to reassure her. "I don't want to lose you. It's like I've been waiting for you my entire life. I'm just saying we need to be careful. We can't let anyone find out."

"I understand," she said.

Morning. Another hot summer's day. Report of an ARV in progress at the Mother-o-Pearls Jewellery Mart in Gabor Precinct. Four perps caught leaving the mart, plus the getaway driver waiting outside. Two dead for resisting, leaving three chained to a holding post awaiting collection. Twenty-five years apiece, with the getaway man sentenced to an extra month for Parking In A Restricted Area. The mathematics of justice.

"No go, Broph." Judge Elvins returned from questioning the perps. "If there was an inside man on the heist, the creeps ain't talking."

"Call Control and have them booked in for in-depth interrogation back at the Sector House. And get graveyard shift to schedule the mart's owner and staff for crime swoops later tonight. Might shake something loose."

"Check." Elvins's hand went to his radio. "Pat-Wagon's already on the way for the perps, and Resyk's been notified about the stiffs. I make it 11.53. What say we get some lunch while it's quiet? We could go to that hottie stand you like so much."

"The precinct's food court is closer." He tried to keep his face neutral. "Anyway, I'm starting to get sick of hotties. You know how it is. Too much of a good thing, I guess."

Night. Melinda was sleeping. Trying not to wake her, he slipped out of bed and dressed without turning the lights on. Citizen clothes. In the two months since their first night, he had learned to be careful. He parked his bike in a different location each time and walked to the basement in Robert Mitchum Block to change out of his uniform. Then he walked to her apartment, keeping an eye out for tails. He had even bought a hat so the Justice Department's spy-cams wouldn't see his face. Precautions. He went off-com four or five times a week now. An hour here, an hour there. Stolen moments. Somebody might get suspicious.

"Billy?" Finding his side of the bed empty, she stirred and began to wake. "You want me to put some synthi-caf on before you go?" Her hand moved to the light switch beside her. "I went to the buy-mart today and got the kind you like-"

"No! Don't touch it!" He ran to the bed and grabbed her hand.

"What is it?" She was startled. "Billy? You're hurting me-"

"The curtains are open." He let go of her hand. "Remember I put anti-glare strips inside the windows to block out the Justice Department's cameras, so we wouldn't have to keep the curtains closed all the time? They only work in the dark." He saw blue eyes in the darkness, frightened. He felt ashamed. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, but we have to be careful."

"I understand," she said.

Morning. Inside the Sector House. Standing in front of his locker getting ready for his shift.

"So, there's the perp." Elvins took his helmet from his own locker and pushed the door closed. "Three o'clock in the morning on Chandler Pedway, carrying a Tri-D player. No receipt. Tries to tell me a friend of his had just given it to him for his birthday. When I ask him this friend's name, he tells me he forgot it."

"Lying To A Judge. You gave him extra time for that?" It was as much a statement as a question. He found he was barely listening. Distracted. Thinking of Melinda. Looking forward to tonight.

"Sure. Another six months. But that's not the point. Thing was he'd stolen the Tri-D all right, but it actually was this guy's birthday. Guess that's what made him think up the story. 'Many happy returns, creep,' I told him." Elvins paused. "You okay, Broph? You seem like you got something on your mind."

"You know us old farts. Always staring into space, remembering the good old days." He lied so often now it was second nature. "Sign of encroaching senility, probably." He smiled. "What's the matter, rookie? You starting to think the old dog can't cut it no more?"

"I've got no worries on that score, Broph." Elvins laughed. "Seriously though, you know there's nobody I'd rather see backing me up when things go perp-shaped. With that in mind, got a tip on a sugar deal going down tonight. Twenty kilos, uncut. You up for a stakeout?"

"You know I am. Just name the place and time."

"The Fatty Freddie's Burger franchise on Thompson and Spillane. Stoolie says the buy's supposed to be happening at 22:00. We should probably make sure we're in position an hour earlier, just to be on the safe side."

"Check. I'll meet you on Spillane at 20:55 and we'll take it from there. You call in any other backup?"

"You're kidding, right?" Elvins smiled again. "This is Brophy and Elvins we're talking about here. The toughest tag team this side of the Universal World Ultimate Wrestling Alliance Federation. The bust hasn't been made yet that we couldn't handle. Long as I got you covering my back, nothing can go wrong."

Night. The Sector House morgue. The sound of his own footsteps echoing behind him. A sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"I thought you might be coming down." Med-Judge Henderson looked up from a body stretched out on the slab. "I was just about to begin the post-mortem. He was your rookie, wasn't he?"

He could not trust himself to answer. He felt ashamed, weighed down by guilty secrets. Secrets. He had fallen asleep at Melinda's apartment. It was 21.45 when she had thought to wake him. By the time he reached Bob Mitchum Block to change into his uniform, it was too late. The call had already gone out over the airwaves. "Code Ninety-Nine Red. Judge down at Fatty Freddie's Burgers, corner of Thompson and Spillane."

Judge down. The words were like a dagger in his heart.

"Bullet in the back of the head." Henderson indicated a gaping wound. "I haven't dug it out yet, but from the size I'm guessing it's a stump slug. One of the perps must have got behind him. Makes you wonder what the hell he thought he was doing, going in there without backup..."

Midday. The hottie stand. Driving in off the meg-way, he saw the parking lot was empty. Melinda was behind the counter. Getting off his bike he pulled out his daystick and walked towards her.

"Billy?" She looked at him in confusion. "What happened? I haven't heard from you in weeks."

"You are under arrest." His voice was emotionless. Judge to perp. "Two years for Breaching Penal Code seventeen, Section two."

"Billy?" Her mouth fell open. "What's the matter with you? Is this some kind of joke?"

"No joke. That extractor vent is a health and safety violation." He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt and threw them on the counter. He didn't want to touch her. "Put those on."

"Billy? Why are you doing this?" Her face was ashen. She reached out towards him. "It's me... Melinda-"

He hit her hard, jabbing the end of his daystick into her stomach. The air exploded out of her as she fell to her knees. He jumped the counter and stood over her as she lay sobbing on the floor. His hand was shaking.

"Don't make this harder than it has to be." He grabbed the cuffs from the counter and dropped them beside her. "Put those on. Now."

"But you said you loved me." She looked up at him. He saw blue eyes crying.

"Shut your face!" The sight of the tears spilling down her cheeks fuelled his rage. "You ever breathe a word of that to anyone and you'll be sorry." He felt his own tears burning beneath his helmet. "No one will believe you. They'll put you in a psycho-cube for indefinite observation." Tears of shame. "If you tell anyone, I'll hear about it. I'll come and get you. I'll have to you put in the cubes for life. I'm a Judge. I can do anything to you I want. You understand me, you bitch?"

"I understand," she said.

Night. Bad dreams. Him and Melinda. Him and Elvins. Elvins's death. The last day at the hottie stand. Melinda crying. Blood seeping from the wound in the back of Elvins's head. Sometimes in his dreams he was there at Elvins's death, paralysed and unable to stop it. Other times he dreamt of killing Melinda, beating her with his daystick until all that was left of her face was a bloody pulp. Dreams and memories. Memories and dreams. Sometimes it was a wonder to him he ever slept at all.

The Sector House. He had worked a double-shift, then come back for his mandatory eight hours' natural sleep. He woke one time too many. He had risen from bed and sought out conversation, anything to keep the dreams from returning.

He had found a group of Judges standing gossiping outside Judge Hass's office. Keller. Chung. Jurgens. Mattski. Pelleto. Whitby. He had listened to

them talk, not offering much in the way of comment, just glad of the company, glad of anything that kept the night at bay.

The lights went out.

A power cut. He heard the voices of the others around him. Expressions of surprise. Bad jokes. Complaints. "Justice Department must've forgot to pay the power bill," someone said. The others laughed. Then, closer, as though from right beside him, he heard another voice.

William Brophy. The sound, a barely audible murmur.

William Brophy. A strange voice, malign and knowing.

William Brophy. A whisper, in the darkness.

It is time to be judged...

"Anderson!" He heard another voice. Shouting. More insistent.

"Anderson!" A light, burning through his eyelids. A hand at his wrist, checking his pulse. The sound of other, more distant voices raised in panic.

"Anderson!" This is wrong, a voice said in his mind. This is not who I am. I'm not a man. I'm not William Brophy. I'm...

"Anderson!"

She opened her eyes. She saw concerned faces in the darkness. A torch beam shining blindingly in her eyes. Confused, she wondered where she was. It came flooding back to her. *Brophy*. She had been deepscanning Brophy.

"Anderson?" Med-Chief Rodriguez breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank Grud. For a minute there, I thought you weren't going to snap out of it."

"I was so close," she said. The words reeled out of her, uncontrolled. "Brophy, he had a lover. An Unjudicial Liaison. Another Judge died. Guilty secrets. He felt ashamed. And then he was outside Hass's office. He heard a voice, whispering to him in the darkness. I was so close. So close. Why did you have to go and bring me back so-"

"Anderson," Rodriguez's voice was calm and patient. "Look around you. The lights went out three minutes ago. There's been another power cut, across the entire Sector House. Just like the last time."

"The last time?" She was still confused. Groggy. Looking around her she saw only darkness.

"Anderson! Don't you understand?" Rodriguez grabbed her shoulder, trying to make her focus. "It's happening again."

SEVEN

CITIZEN QUEEG

For Jeffrey Queeg it was the end of another long and dispiriting day, a day little different from all the thousand days before it. It had certainly begun like all the others.

6:00am. He had been woken by the buzzing of the alarm by his bedside in his thirty-ninth floor apartment in Charles Whitman Block.

6:10am. He had eaten his breakfast: plasti-flakes, synthi-caf and a dry piece of munce toast.

6:30am. He had showered, shaved and brushed his teeth.

6:59am. He had left the apartment, careful to lock the door behind him.

7:00am. Time to find a job.

"Too old," the manager at the Juve-Mart said. "Too young," the Personnel woman at Life Experience Counselling told him. "Too dumb," the Recruitment Facilitator at Applied Computer Ultra-Dynamics sneered at his résumé. "You're kidding, right?" the guy at the pole-dancing place said, refusing to even let him audition.

Just another day. With unemployment running at over eighty-seven per cent, finding a job in Mega-City One was hard work. Yet, day after day, Jeffrey pounded the pedways in search of a salary and a sense of fulfilment. He queued. He filled out forms. He attended interviews. He begged and pleaded, only to find doors slammed shut in his face everywhere he applied.

Another day. Followed by another evening, just like all the evenings before it. He had arrived home at 7:54pm, wincing as he passed the apartment next to his and heard the booming bass lines reverberating from inside it. Experience had taught him that once his neighbour Kowalski started playing loud music on his quad-sound, it could go on for hours. He considered ringing the Judges to complain, but he thought better of it. Kowalski was a big man with a temper. Even if the Judges took him to the cubes, he would be back and Jeffrey would have to live alongside him. It was better just to try to make the best of it. Anything for a quiet life.

As he opened the door, Jeffrey had learned his day had taken an unexpected turn for the worse. He had been burgled. The apartment window had been forced open and all his most prized possessions had been stolen. The not-quite-yet-antique tiepin collection his father had left him. His Tri-D

slugs, including the rare complete first season of "You've Been Fingered". The talking leprechaun figurine he had picked up on his vacation to the Emerald Isle. His best kneepads. Recovering from his initial shock, Jeffrey had noticed the message light blinking on his phone. It had been an automated message from the Justice Department, telling him property believed to belong to him had been found in the possession of a recently arrested bat-burglar. If he wanted to reclaim it he was to report to his local Sector House with all relevant receipts and paperwork, bringing enough money to cover a twenty-five credit fine for negligence. Of course, he had headed off to Sector House 12 at once.

Ten hours later, Jeffrey found himself still sitting in the waiting area opposite the Sector House's check-in desk. By his watch it was 5:52am. Ten hours. He might as well have been there forever. Jeffrey had heard the wheels of justice could grind slowly, but he couldn't help but feel there were limits to what a citizen should be expected to put up with. Enough was enough. He refused to endure this shabby treatment a moment longer. Driven beyond all restraint, he resolved to make a stand. He wanted his property back and he wanted it now.

Advancing on the bullet proof screen of the check-in desk, Jeffrey fixed one of the Judges behind it with a steely glare and made ready to demand his rights.

"My name is Jeffrey Queeg," he said. It seemed better to establish the particulars as swiftly as possible. "My apartment was hit by a bat-burglar last night and I've come here to reclaim my-"

"Take a ticket." Without looking up from his computer screen, the Judge nodded toward the ticket dispenser beside the counter. "Wait until your number's called, then come back to this desk with your documents and you'll be told what to do next."

"I don't think you understand," Jeffrey said. "I already have a number."

"You from out of town?" The Judge briefly raised his eyes to glower at him. "You from Hondo City maybe? Simba? East-Meg Two?"

"No." Locking eyes fearlessly with the Judge, Jeffrey did his best to show he would not be intimidated. "I-"

"It's a religious thing, then? You're a member of the Seventh Day Non-Comprehensionists?"

"No, I..." Jeffrey faltered. This wasn't going quite the way he had expected.

"So, you're an alien who only looks human? You're a shape-changing pod person from the planet Dumb-As-Drokk Five?"

"Uh, no..." Jeffrey found himself wilting helplessly beneath the Judge's stare.

"And here's me thinking there was some reason you didn't speak the local lingo," the Judge said. "Otherwise, what part of 'take a ticket and wait until your number's called' don't you understand? Now, sit down before I decide to book you for Aggravated Time-Wasting and put you in the cubes."

Jeffrey returned meekly to his seat. He looked at his watch and saw it was 6:00am. He had been awake for exactly twenty-four hours, with no sign of an end in sight. I'll give it another two hours, he thought. Then, I'll complain again. I won't let him put me off this time, either. What the hell did he mean, "Aggravated Time-Wasting", anyway? Like his time is any more important than mine! Like I don't have things to do myself. It's another day. I got jobs to be applying for. Yeah, and for all I know, this could be the big one, the day when I finally get somewhere. The day everything changes.

The lights went out. What a way to run a Sector House, Jeffrey thought. Lights going out and people having to wait forever to claim their stuff. No wonder they're planning on closing this place down. He could hear the groans and curses of the other citizens in the waiting area, but he did not join in with the chorus of disapproval. He was distracted by the sound of someone quietly calling his name nearby. There was something about it, something so compelling he could not help but listen. The sound, a barely audible murmur. A strange voice, malign and knowing.

A whisper in the darkness.

The elevators were out as well as the power. Running headlong down the Sector House's emergency stairwell, Anderson realised she should have had the foresight to order an anti-grav chute from the Armoury after the last power cut. At least that way she would not have had to run breathlessly down nine flights of stairs with only the beam of her torch to guide her. Still, she could cry over split synthi-milk later. Right now, she needed to get to her destination, and fast.

The holding cubes. She might not know where the strange voice that had whispered to Brophy would strike next, but the holding cubes seemed as good a place to start as any. Six times out of seven, the killer had used them

as his hunting ground. Granted, even with the bloody message appearing on the wall outside Hass's office, she could not be certain the voice Brophy had heard had anything to do with the deaths of the perps in custody. Her instincts said it was all related, the same instincts now telling her to get to the holding cubes.

"Anderson?" As she emerged from the stairwell and ran into the holding pens area, she saw Chief Warder Sykes waiting with half-a-dozen Judge-Warders in riot gear. "Grud, woman, you look like you've just run the Megathon."

"Thanks," she rasped, lungs burning. "Elevators out... The perps... Anything... wrong?"

"Nothing to report so far," he replied. "All the same, we're ready for the worst-"

There was a scream in the darkness, shrill and terrified. Sykes and the warders ran off in search of the sound with Anderson trailing behind them.

"Cube Two-Twelve," she heard one of the Judges yell. "Grud! It's the cube right next door to Barclay's."

"Open that drokking door," Sykes thundered as his men shoved crowbars in place and tried to force the door open. "I'm not letting another damned perp die, not on my watch."

Slowly, inch by torturous inch, the door came open with a protesting screech. Through it all, the screaming continued. When the door opened wide enough, Anderson shone her torch into the cube and saw the face of the perp inside blinking back at her from the darkness. He was still alive. Unharmed and apparently undamaged. His face transfixed in the beam, the look of terror on the perp's features abruptly softened and evaporated, giving way to a childlike expression of comfort.

"Something's wrong here," she said. "It's like we aren't in the right place."

"I don't drokking believe it," Sykes muttered incredulously as he pushed his way past her and stared into the cube. "Cube Two-Twelve. I should've made the connection earlier." He pointed at the perp. "Aaron Jingles. Sentenced to six months for Persistent Noise Annoyance. He screams whenever it gets dark. He came in three hours ago. Supposed to be on his way to the psycho-cubes for observation, but the transport got held up." He addressed the perp directly. "You don't like it when the lights go out, do you, Aaron?"

"Please can I have a nightlight, Judge?" the perp moaned pathetically, eyes wide in the glare of the torch. "I don't like being in the dark."

"Drokking psychos!" Sykes kicked the doorjamb in aggravation while inside the cube Aaron Jingles shrank back.

The power came back on, bathing the corridor in light.

"It's over," Sykes said, his face dark with suppressed fury. "False alarm. Looks like you ran down all those stairs for nothing, Anderson. Or who knows? Maybe you being here scared the killer away. Either that, or the bastard's playing with us. Enjoying it as he watches us go running around chasing shadows. I tell you, I get my hands on this creep and..." He paused, regaining his composure. "Anyway, like I say, whatever the reason it seems to be over for now."

"What about the rest of the Sector House?" she said. "The killer could've struck somewhere else."

"Negative to that, Anderson," one of the Judge-Warders said, fingers working inside his helmet as he adjusted the comms earpiece inside it. "I've patched into the Sector Control frequencies and I'm reading no incidents anywhere else in the Sector House. Looks like we got through this power cut unscathed."

"So much for instinct," she muttered.

"Hmm? What was that, Anderson?" Sykes turned his head sharply towards her.

"Nothing," she told him. "Guess you're right. It's over for now."

Even as she agreed with him though, she felt a gnawing sense of unease. So far, every time there had been a power cut, somebody inside the Sector House had either died or gone crazy. Which raised an unsettling question.

If neither perps nor Judges were the targets this time, then who was?

Opposite the check-in desk, the return of the lights was greeted with sarcastic applause by those waiting there, until the hard stares of the Judges behind the desk caused the clapping to stop. By then, Jeffrey Queeg was already gone. He was standing just inside the automatic doors that led out of the Sector House, ready for them to open as the power came back on. As it did, he left unnoticed. Just another citizen on his way home.

Jeffrey had had enough of waiting. He had waited his entire life. Waited in queues. Waited for jobs. Waited for dreams and opportunities that somehow never came to pass. And through it all he had been forced to

endure the constant bullying of those around him. Judges, neighbours, complete strangers, the juves who were bigger than him when he was at school. Jeffrey had finally had enough. He was going to make a stand, and he was not going to be put off, especially when he no longer needed to fear being bullied. For now he had a friend to help him.

They are sinners, Jeffrey, the voice - his new guardian angel - whispered to him. *They are sinners, all of them. They must be judged.*

"If you say so," he answered the voice cheerfully. "Sinners. All of them. They need to be judged."

Noticing that the people he passed in the street were looking at him strangely, Jeffrey realised he had spoken to the voice out loud. Better be careful of that, he told himself. People hear you talking to yourself, they'll start to think you're crazy.

Yes, Jeffrey, the voice agreed in his head. *You have enemies. You must be careful. There are sinners everywhere. They must be judged.*

"Judged. Right you are," Jeffrey said, then chided himself as he realised he had spoken out loud again. He could see this business of having a special friend that only he could hear was going to take a bit of getting used to. *They're all sinners*, he told the voice, talking back to it in the same way it talked to him - in his head. *They need to be judged. Every one of them.*

Yes, Jeffrey, the voice agreed with him again. It really was the most agreeable friend Jeffrey had ever had. *You will strike them down. You will punish them for their transgressions. You will purge this city with fire and blood.*

Fire and blood? thought Jeffrey. *That sounds kind of messy. Couldn't I just shoot them all instead?*

Very well, the voice said. *But first you must arm yourself. Not only with a warlike aspect and the armour of righteousness, but with-*

Guns, thought Jeffrey. *I'll need guns. Lots of them. And plenty of bullets too, what with there being so many sinners about in need of killing*.

Very good, Jeffrey. The voice seemed pleased. *Yes, you will need guns. And I know exactly where you can find them.*

The voice whispered a name to him, a name he knew well. Hearing it, Jeffrey smiled. And, with that smile, he felt a warm and happy sense of kinship suffuse him.

It was still early days, of course. But it really looked like this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

EIGHT

COMMAND DECISIONS

"You want me to call in the Exorcists?" Sector Chief Franklin said. There was a note of incredulity to the question, but beneath it Deputy Chief Grimes could read the subtle workings of anxiety in the old man's voice. "Surely that would be an overreaction?"

"I have to admit it's a judgement call," Anderson said. "I can't tell you exactly what kind of entity we're dealing with here. All I know is we'll need specialist help if we're going to stop it."

"A judgement call," Franklin echoed her as though searching the words for sinister implications. Then, apparently troubled by what he found, he fell silent.

The three of them were sitting in Conference Room Five, a slew of files and reports lying strewn across the table between them. Twenty minutes before, Anderson contacted the sector chief's office and requested a meeting to discuss the latest developments in her investigation. Now, listening to the nuances of the conversation between Franklin and the Psi-Judge as the meeting progressed, Grimes was pleased to see his mounting suspicions over the last few weeks as to his superior's state of mind were confirmed. It was plain to see the old man was beginning to lose his nerve.

"You've contacted Judge Hass about this?" There was a wary tone to Franklin's voice.

"Tried to," Anderson shrugged. "Said he was too busy to be bothered right now and I should try and come back later. Rather than waste any more time waiting, I thought I'd be better off coming to you directly."

"But he's the lead Judge on the case." Franklin seemed quietly worried. "This is an SJS investigation, after all. If any more outside help is going to be called in, Hass has to sign off on the decision. I've breached protocol on this once already."

"I'm aware of that, chief," Anderson said. "But if I can't get a meeting with Hass, I can hardly get him to sign off on anything. Let's be frank - no pun intended. We all know SJS don't play well with others. Hass is stonewalling me. It's pretty clear he doesn't like the fact there's even *one* Psi-Judge on this case, never mind a whole gang of them running round the Sector House outside his supervision. There'd have to be a ghost dressed in

a white sheet and clanking chains turning cartwheels in the Sector House right in front of him before Hass would agree to call in the Exorcist Squad. And by then, it could be too late."

"Too late?" Franklin shifted uneasily. "Yes, of course. I understand your concern."

He's lost his nerve, all right, Grimes thought. With only a few weeks to go before he takes the Academy job, the last thing the old man wants to do is start making more waves. He went out on a limb already, calling Anderson in. Now, he's probably afraid the whole thing's about to blow up in his face and ruin his retirement. He's floundering and the entire Sector House is floundering around him. A sector chief needs to be a strong leader. It's just like I always thought; the old man is becoming a liability.

Grimes felt a familiar surge of bitterness. He had been Franklin's deputy for nearly ten years, doing all the jobs the old man hated: compiling crime stats, administering shift patterns, liaising with the Judges of Accounting Division and insuring the budget targets were met. All the myriad and vital tasks that kept a Sector House running in working order. They were tasks for which Franklin had little inclination. Imagining himself an old school Street Judge and "man of action", the sector chief made no secret of the fact that he thought bureaucracy was beneath him. Accordingly, Grimes had been forced to take up the slack in the old man's place, dreaming of the day when he would be made sector chief in his own right, able to delegate the same tasks to others. It was beginning to look as though that dream would never be realised.

Serves him right if this entire business does blow up on him, Grimes thought sourly. If the senile old fool had only stood down years ago like he should have, I could have been sector chief by now. Instead, he hung on for grim death until Justice Department finally decided to get rid of him. Now, I'm about to get stuck playing second fiddle to Meryl Coolidge. She's a real ball-breaker, I hear. Probably got her own man in mind for my job already. A couple more months and I'll be shunted sideways to the first post she can find that will have me, and nobody wants a former deputy who never made it as far as sector chief. There's stigma attached to it. The whiff of failure. People think there must be some good reason why you were passed over.

"Grimes?" He heard Franklin call his name. "We haven't heard your input on this yet. You have an opinion?"

Becoming aware he had been so deep in thought he had lost track of the conversation, Grimes played for time - looking down momentarily at the sheen on the surface of the table before him as though considering his words carefully.

"I do have a couple of questions, Sector Chief," Grimes said at last. "With your permission..." Seeing Franklin nod for him to continue, he turned towards Anderson. "Obviously I'm a layman in such matters so you'll have to forgive me if my questions seems a little obtuse at first. But you've talked about 'ghosts' here, Anderson. Am I to understand you're saying that you think the Sector House is *haunted*?"

"Could be," Anderson shrugged again. "There have been incidents of hauntings at Sector Houses before. Then again, there are other possibilities. It doesn't have to be a ghost. There's a lot of different kinds of psychic entities out there. And most of them can be pretty nasty."

"But you are sure there is definitely a psychic entity behind all this? You've managed to conclusively rule out any of the more mundane explanations?"

"Not at this stage, no." Her eyes narrowed as she looked at him closely. "It doesn't work that way. All I can say for sure is what I experienced when I scanned Judge Brophy. He heard a voice whispering to him in the darkness, just before he went futsie."

"And this 'voice'? You're convinced it was a psychic entity?" Grimes pressed her.

"No question on that. There was something about it. Believe me, if you'd been in Brophy's head and heard that creepy whisper, you'd be thinking the same thing yourself."

"I don't doubt it for a second," Grimes smiled, trying to put her at ease. "All the same, I am made slightly uncomfortable at the thought of basing all our investigative assumptions on your experiences inside the mind of a madman. By all accounts, Brophy had just suffered a psychotic episode, and psychotics find it difficult to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Really, for all we know this whispering voice might simply be another part of Brophy's delusions."

"Uh-huh." Anderson looked at him pointedly. "And you think these delusions were responsible for the bloody messages on the walls, not to mention the dead perps in the holding cubes?"

"Don't misunderstand me." Grimes waved her sarcasm away. "I'm not denying there's a fair share of unexplained phenomena in this case. For all we know, your theory of some unknown psychic entity being at work here might well be true. All I'm saying is that we have yet to receive definitive evidence to resolve the question one way or another. Remember, you said so yourself - there are other possibilities."

"I take it you don't believe we need to call in the Exorcists, then?" Franklin cut in.

"I don't discount the idea," Grimes replied. "And I can certainly see Psi-Judge Anderson's point of view." He nodded, smiling towards her once more. "But I think it could be somewhat premature to go to that extreme at this stage - at least until we have more proof it's really necessary. After all, as far as we know, Anderson's arrival here may well have already had an effect. There were no further incidents during the last power cut. Perhaps the killer - psychic entity or not - has been made wary by her presence. Either way, my recommendation would be for Anderson to continue with her investigation and bring us any new evidence as she finds it. At least then we can reach a more informed decision."

"I'm inclined to agree with you, Grimes," Franklin said thoughtfully. He seemed relieved. "There's no reason to go over Hass's head again on this. Not yet. Not until we have a better idea what we're dealing with." His mind made up, Franklin pushed his chair back from the table and stood up. "I'm sorry, Anderson. Permission denied. Now, unless there's any more business, I'd say the meeting's over."

Frustration written on her face, Anderson said nothing. Watching her from the corner of his eye as he followed Franklin out of the room, Grimes felt a small moment of pleasure at the adept way he had handled the situation. He did not credit Anderson's "ghost story" for an instant: Psi-Judges were notoriously unreliable and the woman seemed ready to jump at shadows. Whatever was going on here, they would all look like fools if they called in the Exorcists and it turned out to be a false alarm. No, it was always better to consider these things coldly and rationally in the clear light of day. Thankfully, there was still one man in the Sector House able to do just that. Himself.

Creepy voices, he thought. What complete and utter nonsense. Hysteria like that can be dangerous in a Sector House - especially when the sector chief is too weak to stamp it out. A strong leader is what this place needs.

A strong leader. The old bitterness returned. It was so unfair. Here he was, a strong and able man, and yet he was never going to be afforded the opportunity to show just how great a sector chief he could be. I could have been one of the best, he thought. Certainly better than that bitch Meryl Coolidge. She's probably in tight with Chief Judge Hershey, all women together, otherwise why give her the Sector House when it should have gone to me?

He had worked towards becoming a sector chief his entire life, only to be brought down at the last hurdle by a combination of the whims of a doddering incumbent and the byzantine decision-making processes of Justice Department itself. It was more than unfair, it was inexplicable. A tragic waste. A crime against reason. An appalling injustice.

Frankly, it seemed to him that one might almost call it a *sin*.

Well that wasn't so hard in the end, Jeffrey Queeg thought as he stood over the body of his first victim with a bloody knife in his hand. Makes you wonder how come I never thought of doing anything like this before.

Walking quickly through the nearly deserted early morning streets, Jeffrey had returned to Charles Whitman Block straight from the Sector House. He had gone into his apartment, taken a knife from the kitchen drawer and made the short walk down the hallway to the apartment next door.

"Whaddya want?" Kowalski had glowered at him when he answered the bell. "It's six-thirty in the gruddamn morning."

"You're going to be my first, Stan," Jeffrey had smiled as he pulled the knife from behind his back. "Just thought you might like to know that."

Forty-seven stab wounds later, Kowalski was dead. Leastways, Jeffrey thought it was forty-seven - in the heat of his enthusiasm he had lost count somewhere in the high thirties. Dragging the deadweight of Kowalski's body into the apartment and closing the door behind him, Jeffrey noticed the corpse looking at him with the same belligerent expression Kowalski had always worn in life. Feeling an abrupt and nameless anger, Jeffrey found himself tempted to remove the expression by gouging out his eyeballs and cutting up his face. He discounted the idea. Imagine carving off a dead man's face just because you don't like the way he's looking at you, Jeffrey thought. Now that would be crazy.

We have things to do here, Jeffrey, the voice in his head reminded him. *Remember? Guns. Lots of them. There is a hidden catch beside the light switch on the right wall of the apartment. Find it, Jeffrey, and press it*.

Following the voice's instructions, Jeffrey went over to the wall and ran his fingers along the side of the light switch. There. Finding the catch he pressed it, taking a quick step backwards as part of the wall slid open on well-oiled hinges to reveal a compartment concealed behind it. Looking inside, Jeffrey could see that the voice had not misled him. There were guns, nearly a dozen of them, all polished to a shine and obviously well maintained, mounted on display hooks with small handwritten index cards identifying what they were. He saw pistols, a sawn-off double-barrelled stump gun, even what looked like a particularly big spit gun. A treasure trove of potential death and destruction, and right now it all belonged to him.

"Browning 9mm". Jeffrey read the information on one of the index cards. "Circa 1935. Semi-automatic pistol with thirteen round clip. Military issue, believed to have seen action during World War II".

"Smith & Wesson .44 Magnum". Jeffrey read one of the other cards. Circa 1970. "Revolver with six-round cylinder. Civilian weapon, believed to have belonged to a Mr Harold Callaghan of San Francisco".

They're all from the Twentieth century, Jeffrey thought as he looked at each of the cards in turn. Antiques. Kowalski must have been a collector. Funny when you think about it. All this time I was sitting next door to a guy with an illegal arsenal in his apartment and I never knew it. Wonder if any of them still work?

They work, Jeffrey, the voice inside his head told him. *All of them. The sinner Kowalski was not a man to collect firearms that could not shoot. See the drawers at the bottom of the compartment? You will find the ammunition for the guns there. And, Jeffrey? There are even grenades.*

Pulling the drawers open, Jeffrey saw the voice was right. There were dozens of boxes of bullets. It was everything he could have asked for. With this kind of firepower at his disposal, there was no way anybody was ever going to bully him again. All the same, as he picked up the big spit gun and hefted its threatening weight in his hands, he felt a small niggle of disappointment. Thanks to current marketing techniques and violent Tri-D programming, like most Mega-City citizens, Jeffrey believed the effectiveness of any given gun was in direct proportion to the coolness of its

brand name. Widowkiller. ManSlaughter 12mm. Violator 3000. Even if he had only ever seen them on Tri-D before, those were the names of the kinds of guns he was used to. Looking at the name on the index card for the gun he now held in his hands, Jeffrey couldn't help but feel there was something missing. There seemed something inadequate about it, as though it lacked a certain something in the coolness stakes.

AK-47? What kind of dumb name for a gun was that?

NINE

MODUS OPERANDI

So much for following official channels, Anderson thought as she walked the corridors of the Sector House. Looks like I'm on my own, at least for now.

The meeting had not gone well. From the first it had been clear that Chief Franklin was wary of doing anything to further antagonise SJS, while dealing with Deputy Chief Grimes had been like talking to a wall. If Anderson had been a smoother operator, she might have gone in there with a game plan, trying to play the two of them off against each other until she got what she wanted. She simply did not have it in her to work that way. She had always been the kind to say things straight out. She spoke her mind, leaving the politicking to people like Grimes and Hass. Even if, at times like these, she wished she could be more adept when it came to the subtleties of inter-divisional politics.

I'm a Psi-Judge, she thought. There's part of the problem to begin with. In Psi Division we're used to dealing with the unknown and the intangible. We get accustomed to relying on our instincts where most Judges like things to be a hell of a lot more concrete. Men like Franklin and Grimes, they want to see physical evidence before they make a decision. Forensics, surveillance footage, computer analysis: anything they can touch, see or put a number on. The last thing they want is for some Psi-Judge to come rushing into their office telling them "I've got a hunch" and expecting them to take action because of it. You do that and they look at you like you've just shown up straight out of simp school.

To a degree, she had expected it. She had known she was pushing it by going to them without more evidence to back up her claims. If she was honest with herself, she knew in part it was because the psychic blankness of the crime scenes and the killer's victims had spooked her. The corpses of Leland Barclay and the others had seemed little more than hollow shells, as though every last trace of the men they were had been obliterated. In all her time in Psi Division, she had never felt anything like it. Whenever or however a person died, there was always something left behind: a residual imprint of thoughts, memories and emotions. To have found six corpses without that imprint was deeply unsettling.

You're thinking too much, she reminded herself sharply. It's time to turn off your thoughts. Remember what you're doing here.

It was the oldest trick in the Psi-Judge's handbook. Having failed so far to make any significant headway in the case via the normal methods of investigation, it was time to see if her unconscious mind could help solve the case for her. It was a problem of letting go. Ever since she was a child, Anderson had lived in two worlds - the psychic and the physical - relying on her training and experience in the years since to navigate between them. It was a delicate balancing act. The problem was that both the conscious and unconscious mind were capable of accessing a psychic's powers, making controlling those same powers a difficult skill to master.

Many emerging psychics were unable to do so, and over the years Anderson had seen dozens of tragic cases: telepaths driven to madness because they could not withstand the continuous stream of thoughts forcing themselves into their heads from the constant babble of the minds around them, precogs who became drooling basket cases haunted by visions of all the disasters they had failed to prevent, telekinetics whose powers reacted wildly at the slightest annoyance, causing inanimate objects to lash out murderously at their loved ones in the course of even the most minor disagreements. To survive, psychics had to learn to create an inner set of checks and boundaries. For a telepath like Anderson that meant narrowing the focus, learning how to filter out the babble of other minds so she only read the ones she wanted to. Of course this inner filter was not perfect: she still picked up random stray thoughts and emotions from those around her; she couldn't help it. For the most part, however, she had learned how to minimise such accidental readings and make her powers operate by the conscious act of will.

Like most things, it came with a price. Sometimes the strictures of the conscious mind could get in the way, blinding the telepath to things that were already known to her unconscious mind. It was part of the reason psychics relied so heavily on their instincts, recognising that what other people called hunches and "gut feelings" were simply examples of the unconscious mind trying to bridge the gap with the conscious. Now, seeing no better way to get to the bottom of what was going on at Sector House 12, Anderson had decided to wander the Sector House's corridors in the hope her unconscious might furnish her with some insight. It had worked before.

All she had to do was try not to think at all, letting her conscious mind grow still, and see where it took her.

There was something. She felt it almost the moment she let her thoughts fall silent: a dark and menacing presence at the very edge of her perceptions. Something. Somewhere. She could not tell what it was or which direction it was in, but she was abruptly sure it was in the Sector House with her. Somewhere. Some thing. It was so vague and diffuse she found it impossible to home in on. Some thing. A shadow. But she could feel it all around her. A shadow. Waiting. She could dimly sense it, even if trying to find its source was like having a word on the tip of her tongue. Waiting. Watching. It was in there with her, she was sure of it. Watching. Planning.

Hungry.

Abruptly, she thought she had it, but just as swiftly it was gone - as though whatever it was had realised she was looking at it and had drawn itself back into hiding in the darkness. But she would not be put off. This was her first absolute confirmation that what she had seen in Brophy's mind had not been a delusion. She had recognised the same psychic entity at work in the shadowy presence she felt in the Sector House and in the whispering voice that had helped drive Brophy to madness. A psychic signature. Granted, it was nothing she could take to Sector Chief Franklin as proof, but it was enough to convince her. And where she had sensed it once, she could sense it again. It was only a matter of continuing her chosen course of action. Wandering the corridors of the Sector House, keeping her mind clear and seeing what sensations came to her. Whatever it was it might have returned to hiding, but she refused to be discouraged. She would continue her search. She would find it again. And after that?

After that, she could only hope for the best.

Artie Gruber. Dolores Wilkerson. Greg Petersen. The Kinsey family. The bitchy Brit-Cit drag queen who lived in Apartment Forty-Three-B. By the time Jeffrey Queeg had gone door-to-door, visiting each of his neighbours in the apartments nearest his own in turn, he had been forced to reconsider his initial misgivings. Despite its dumb name, the AK-47 had worked like a charm. A pull on the trigger and it spat lead as good as any spit gun he had ever seen on the Tri-D. Admittedly, with the way the gun jumped and bucked around on full auto, it meant the bullets tended to go everywhere. In

a lot of ways though, that only made Jeffrey's life easier; with the gun spraying so many shots about it was not like he could miss the target. Anyway, a few stray rounds here and there hardly mattered; he had plenty of bullets left. Not to mention plenty of his neighbours left who still needed killing.

I'm going to kill them all, Jeffrey thought, feeling himself gripped by a sudden and dizzying sense of freedom. Every guy who ever jostled me in the hallway; every woman who ever refused to look at me; every kid whose screeching kept me awake all night. Anyone who ever bullied or hurt me. The voice was right. Sinners, that's what they are. Each and every one of them. They need to be punished.

All the same, with eight bodies behind him already, Jeffrey had been on the receiving end of a few revelations. In all the action shows he had seen on Tri-D, when someone was shot they were always knocked backwards a few metres by the force of the impact. It turned out this was a myth. In real life, things were different. The people he shot tended to crumple to the ground when the bullets struck them, their bodies shaking and flopping around for a while before they died. It was a lot less dramatic than on Tri-D, but as disappointed as he was at the lack of spectacle, Jeffrey decided there was not much he could do about it. What happened when human beings got shot was just what happened. It wasn't like it was within his power to change it.

What had surprised him even more though was the way some people reacted when they realised he had come to kill them. Artie and the drag queen had begged for their lives and acted largely as he thought they would. Dolores Wilkerson, though, had offered him her body - not that he had accepted it, seeing as she was a skank. Then there was the Kinsey woman. Where Jeffrey had expected her to run when he started firing, instead she had thrown herself in front of the bullets to try to save her kids. Not that it had mattered at all in the end. He had killed them anyway. It had been an eye-opener though, seeing how people responded to opening their front doors and finding a man with a gun waiting on the doorstep. If nothing else, it certainly made things a bit more interesting.

Guess it just goes to show you, Jeffrey thought as he made his way jauntily down the hallway in search of his next victim. You don't really know what people are like until they are right up against it, staring death in the face. That's when the truth comes out, and by then it's too late.

The gun, Jeffrey, the voice whispered to him in his head. *The assault rifle. It is out of ammunition. You will need to reload it.*

Removing the AK-47's magazine, Jeffrey saw that the voice was right. Abruptly, he remembered he had forgotten to reload the gun after all the excitement of killing the Kinseys. Hurriedly taking another magazine from inside his coat, Jeffrey breathed a sigh of relief. Imagine if he had kicked in the door to the next apartment, only to find his gun was empty? It could have been embarrassing, all right. Killing people sure could be a complicated business. Not for the first time, Jeffrey found himself thanking Grud he had the voice with him to keep an eye out for all the details.

Ever since twenty-odd minutes ago when Jeffrey's murder spree had first begun in earnest, the voice had been helping him: telling him how many people were inside an apartment before he kicked the door down, giving him thoughtful tips and advice, whispering encouragement. When Greg Peterson had suddenly bolted from his apartment while Jeffrey was killing Dolores Wilkerson next door, the voice had warned him in a nick of time - giving Jeffrey the chance to gun down Peterson before he could reach the lifts and get away. Of course, the voice's help did not come without a price. Every time Jeffrey killed somebody, the voice asked him to leave a message behind, written on a wall in the victim's blood. The voice even told Jeffrey what to write. Mostly it was the same word, over and over, but sometimes the voice added other words and phrases to vary it a little. To be honest, it was kind of gross. It was bad enough to feel warm sticky blood on his hand, never mind the way it congealed and stuck under Jeffrey's fingernails afterwards. If the voice asked him to do something, though, Jeffrey was hardly in a position to refuse. Having the voice with him was like having an extra pair of eyes and ears working on his behalf. The voice was his special friend. His guardian angel. With the voice there to help him, Jeffrey felt like he was immortal.

The man in Forty-Six-A has a stump gun hidden inside his closet, the voice whispered to him. *Be careful of him.*

"You think I should leave him alone?" Jeffrey said. He found he had lost his earlier inhibitions about speaking to the voice aloud. Now that he had a gun in his hand it did not seem to matter anymore what people thought of him. "Go on to the next one instead?"

He is a sinner, Jeffrey, the voice said. *He must be judged. Ring his doorbell, but make sure you stay out of sight. When you hear him come to*

the door, shoot through the peephole. Use the Magnum, Jeffrey. It has more penetration.

"Okay," Jeffrey said. "Boy, you sure do think of everything, voice. And you know an awful lot about guns and such."

Thank you, Jeffrey. From its tone, the voice seemed pleased. *But you do not need to call me "voice". I have a name. Uriel. Call me Uriel. In life I was...* Abruptly the voice fell silent, as though some fleeting fragment of memory had made it uneasy. Then, its tone grew hard. *The man in Apartment Forty-six-A. Kill him. Now.*

Wondering if he had inadvertently offended the voice in some way, Jeffrey did as he was told, staying hidden by the side of the door as he rang the bell of the apartment, the weight of the antique revolver feeling strange and ungainly in his hand as he listened for an answer. Then, as he heard footsteps from inside and waited for them to draw nearer, Jeffrey noticed the plasteen surface of the door beside him was painted a different shade from the others in the block.

That's not battleship grey, he thought. It looks more like ash grey. Or maybe light gunmetal. When I tried to get them to change the colour of my door, Housing Department told me it was against the rules. The guy must have got a special dispensation. Bet he doesn't have a permit for that stump gun, either. Guy like that, he deserves all that's about to happen to him, and then some.

"Leave me alone," he heard a man's voice on the other side of the door, querulous and frightened. "I've got a gun. And I heard the shooting and called the Judges. You hear me? The Judges are on their way. You'd better run."

Now, Jeffrey, he heard the voice say in his head, calm yet urgent.

Swiftly pressing the revolver's barrel against the peephole, Jeffrey pulled the trigger. The noise was deafening, while the recoil of the gun pushed back so painfully against his wrist that for an instant he thought he must have sprained it. Rubbing his wrist gingerly, Jeffrey listened with his ear against the door for a moment with bated breath. Everything was quiet, but though there was now a nearly fist-sized hole in the door where the peephole had been, Jeffrey was wary about putting his eye there to look inside it. The voice had said the guy had a stump gun.

He is dead, Jeffrey, the voice whispered. *He told the truth, however. The Judges are coming. They are in the building with us already*.

"Judges?" Jeffrey felt his mouth go dry. "Holy Grud, voice, I didn't think they'd get here so fast-"

Uriel. My name is Uriel, the voice told him. *I am an Angel of the Lord. I bring fire and retribution to this city. You are my proxy. You will not take the Lord Grud's name in vain.*

"Sorry, voi... Uriel," Jeffrey caught himself just in time. "I was just worried, is all. Judges are pretty tough. I don't know if I can take them."

Calm yourself, Jeffrey, the voice said, patient and reassuring. *I am with you. I have a plan. Listen to me. This is what I want you to do...*

"Can't find a pulse." Judge Harlan Reed pressed his fingers to the neck of a man lying sprawled facedown on the floor. "Multiple entry wounds in his back. Looks like he was making a run for it when he got shot."

"Either that or the perp's got himself a gun that can shoot round corners," Judge Margaret Ebden said sarcastically. Her voice was tense, her Lawgiver in her hand as her eyes warily scanned the hallway before them. "You can leave checking for vitals to the med-teams, Reed - whenever the stomm they get here. We got us a perp to catch."

Responding to a call of a futsie on the rampage at Charles Whitman Block, Reed had run into Ebden in the block lobby three minutes ago. Now, emerging from the elevator doors on the thirty-ninth floor, they had found the body of a man lying dead directly in front of them, with more corpses and dozens of expended shell casings littered all the way along the hallway.

"Judge Ross to Control," Ross said. "Responding with Judge Ebden to futsie incident at Charles Whitman. Confirmed at least eight casualties so far on thirty-ninth floor. No ID on perp. Multiple shell casings on the floor indicate he's probably using some kind of spit gun. Requesting additional backup. Over."

"Acknowledged," his helmet earpiece crackled into life. "Backup on its way. ETA: four minutes. Accessing block surveillance footage now. Will advise if we can ID or locate your perp for you. Sector Control out."

"Backup?" Ebden's gaze did not waver from the hallway. "There's two of us here, Ross. Sounds to me like you need to grow some."

"Procedure," he replied. "These block corridors can be a maze. We could end up needing help to find the perp."

"If you say so." Ebden nodded towards the bodies. "You ask me, we follow the line of corpses and it should lead us right to him. Come on. Let's

get hunting futsie."

Flicking off the safety of his Lawgiver, Ross moved to the right of the hallway while, opposite, Ebden moved smoothly to the left. Advancing cautiously along his side of the corridor, Ross saw half a dozen bodies arranged in a haphazard pile on the floor with the word *Judged* written in bloody red letters on the wall beside them.

"Drag marks on the floor," he said, looking down at the blood trails as he walked past the pile of bodies. "Looks like he must have killed them in their apartments and then dragged them out into the hallway. You see the message on the wall? You think the perp's trying to tell us he's some kind of Judge?"

"I look like a shrink to you, Ross?" Ebden snorted in irritation as they pushed forward, further down the hallway. "This is a futsie we're talking about here, for drokk's sake. Grud knows why these guys do anyth-"

There was a sound behind them. Recognising it as the soft thud of bodies falling to the ground, Ross whirled, catching sight of a bloodstained figure in an overcoat emerging smiling from his hiding place among the pile of corpses they had just walked past. The futsie! Ross's mind raced. He was hiding. That's why he moved the bodies. Ross tried to bring his Lawgiver to bear as, beside him, Ebden did likewise. But it was too late. Grinning, eyes shining out in crazed jubilation from a face painted in a scarlet mask of blood, the futsie lifted the oversized spit gun in his hands and fired. Ross caught a fleeting glimpse of Ebden from the corner of his eye, her body falling backwards as a bullet took her in the throat. He felt the impact as something struck his chest and helmet. And then...

Then...

Then, there was only pain.

"Code Ninety-Nine Red." The Judge's voice was weak and faltering, his face pale with shock. Advancing on him as the man lay slumped wounded against the wall, for a moment Jeffrey thought the Judge's words were meant for him, until he realised he was talking to someone on his helmet radio. "Judges down at Charles Whitman. I think Ebden's dead. Judges down..."

Once again, it had worked like a charm. Following the voice's whispered instructions, Jeffrey had stacked a pile of bodies in the hallway and hidden inside it. It had been uncomfortable waiting there, confronted on every side

by the staring faces of his victims and feeling their dripping blood oozing over him. But the voice had been right. The Judges had walked right past him, allowing Jeffrey to get the drop on them. He had emptied nearly an entire magazine, but it had been worth it in the end. The woman Judge was dead. And the man? He soon would be.

"Judges down..." The Judge tried to reach for his fallen Lawgiver, only to see Jeffrey kick it away. "Judges down. Merciful drokking Grud, somebody help me..."

"You shouldn't take the Lord's name in vain," Jeffrey said, standing over him and pointing the AK-47 at his face. "The voice - Uriel - he told me to tell you that." Looking down at the Judge, he saw frightened eyes gazing back at him. It made him feel strong. "You can't intimidate me any more," Jeffrey told him. "'A shape-changing pod person from the planet Dumb-As-Drokk Five'? I bet that doesn't seem so funny to you now, does it?"

"Please," the Judge coughed, blood spluttering from his mouth. "I don't know what you're talking about. Please..."

Kill him, Jeffrey, he heard the voice in his head, its tone hungry and eager. *He is a sinner. He must be judged.*

"I don't have any argument with that," Jeffrey said. He pulled the trigger.

"They'll send others, won't they?" he said afterwards. Gazing down at the body of the Judge, Jeffrey felt curiously lightheaded. I've killed Judges, he thought. Two of them. Everything seemed different now, like he had crossed a line somewhere without even knowing it. "They'll send more Judges. Lots of them. They'll try to kill me. They won't leave me alone. Not now."

Remember I am with you, Jeffrey, the voice told him. *Remember I am your shield. Your protector. I walk beside you.*

"But there's only the two of us," Jeffrey said. "And there's hundreds of Judges in this city. Thousands. How are we ever going to be able to take them all on?"

Silence. The voice said nothing.

"You know what to do, right?" Jeffrey found himself in need of comfort. "Voice... Uriel? You know what to do about the Judges?"

Again, silence.

"Uriel?" Jeffrey was beginning to feel alarmed. "I don't mean to seem ungrateful, but I mean... You do have a plan, right?"

Yes, Jeffrey, I have a plan, the voice spoke at last. Jeffrey heard a new sound in his head, a strange sound that seemed to echo around inside his mind. It made him uneasy. It was a sound unlike anything he had heard from his guardian angel before.

He could have sworn it was laughter.

TEN

FREEDOM GOT AN AK

"Emergency code ninety-nine red. Repeat: code ninety-nine red. Judges down in futsie incident at Charles Whitman Block. Judges down. All available units please respond!"

"Acknowledged, Control. Psi-Judge Anderson responding. ETA to Whitman: five minutes. Requesting further details. Over."

"Acknowledged, Anderson. Judges down are Ross and Ebden. No ID on the perp yet, but he's reported as armed with a spit gun. Other Judges and med-teams en route to the scene. Will advise you with further details as they become available. Control out."

She had been walking the corridors of the Sector House, letting her mind wander freely as she attempted to track the entity, when she heard the call over the Sector House intercom. Code Ninety-Nine Red. The most foreboding phrase in the entire lexicon of the Justice Department. Even with her case unresolved, there was no way Anderson could ignore it. Nor would she want to. Code Ninety-Nine Red. Judges down. Somewhere, fellow Judges were in trouble. If there was one unwritten rule among the Judges of the Big Meg, it was that a code red meant "drop everything and haul ass to the scene as quickly as possible".

Having retrieved her bike from the Sector House parking bay, Anderson pushed the accelerator as she sped along the meg-ways, skedways and overzooms to her destination. Brando. Nicholson. Hopper. McQueen. The Peter Fonda Memorial Interchange. The names of the streets on the way to Charles Whitman rushed past her while all the time she hoped she was not too late.

"Control to Anderson," her bike radio blared amid the roar of the engine and the whoosh of air. "First backup Judges on the scene at Whitman have made contact with the futsie. Do you want to be patched in to their comms traffic? Over."

"Affirmative, Control. I want to know what we're dealing with."

"Acknowledged, Anderson. Switching channels now."

For a moment the radio crackled with static as the channels were switched. She heard a man whispering. His voice all but drowned out by the

brutal *tat-a-tat-tat* of a weapon firing on full automatic somewhere in the background.

"...need more backup!" the voice was hoarse with barely suppressed panic. "McCartney and Hoskins are down. The futsie's a walking arsenal. I'm trying to get behind him but it's like the drokker's got eyes in the back of his-"

There was a scream and the sound of more gunfire. For an instant the radio shrieked out an ear-splitting wail of feedback, then hissed before falling silent.

Dead air.

"Connection's broken." The channel switched back to Sector Control. "We've lost them."

Anderson refused to dwell on whether he meant the connection or the Judges.

"Understood, Control," she said. In the distance she could see "Charles Whitman" written in large letters down the side of one of the blocks ahead of her. "ETA to Whitman now one minute. Do you have a floor number for that last transmission?"

"A call-in from a block resident reporting gunfire puts it at the thirty-eighth. Ross and Ebden were ambushed on thirty-nine so it sounds like the creep's working his way down. More backup is on its way. ETA: three minutes. You may want to wait for them to catch up."

"Negative, Control. I'm going in the second I get there. Anderson out."

"Received and understood. Will advise you as soon as other units arrive. Control out. Oh, and Anderson? Grudspeed."

Vin Meacham. Jeannie Chow. Jerry Kramer. Edie Morales. By the time Jeffrey's murder spree had reached the thirty-eighth floor, he no longer knew the names of the people he was killing. Instead, he had to check the lists of apartment residents posted alongside the elevator station at the floor entrance. The Markhams in Fourteen-A. The Husseins in Eighteen-C. George and Myrtle Kahn in Apartment Twenty-B. Door by door, room by room, bullet by bullet, corpse by corpse: before he was halfway along the thirty-eighth, names had given way to numbers. Soon, the numbers became boring in turn and they too gave way. Ninety-seven. Ninety-eight. Ninety-nine. Upon reaching his hundredth victim he stopped counting, killing

without thought of who the person was or how many others he had killed. Once a body was dead, who cared what its name or number was?

He stank of cordite. His arms and shoulders ached. He was covered in blood. He still felt the same dizzying sense of freedom he had experienced when he first started shooting, but with a body count now in triple figures, Jeffrey found he was getting tired. Every time he went inside an apartment and saw the beds in the bedrooms he just wanted to stretch out on one of them and get some sleep, but the voice was insistent. It would not let him rest. Jeffrey's enthusiasm for their joint crusade might be waning, but Uriel's appetite for carnage never seemed to be sated.

The woman in Forty-A, the voice said in his head. *She is about to make a break for it, Jeffrey. Kill her. Now.*

Turning to see a door burst open as a middle-aged woman suddenly ran from her apartment and sprinted toward the elevators, Jeffrey lifted the stump gun by his side and fired. The pellets caught her in the small of her back, sending her tumbling to the floor with a scream.

"Please!" she said, as Jeffrey walked over to her and mechanically pointed the stump gun to fire the other barrel. "No, please! Please don't-"

The stump gun fired. More cordite. More blood splattering up at him as the woman's face disappeared in the blast. Jeffrey didn't like the stump gun. It was noisy. It only carried two rounds - one in each barrel. The recoil was nearly as bad as the Magnum and it made his arms hurt more, but after working his way from door to door along one-and-a-half floors, he was getting short of bullets. He had stuffed all the guns and ammunition from Stan Kowalski's collection he could fit into his overcoat, but there was a limit to how much a man could carry. Jeffrey had to conserve his stocks and use each gun for the task to which it was best suited. The stump gun was for stopping runners. The Magnum for shooting through walls and doors. The other pistols - the Browning and the Colt - he used for the more common or garden shootings when he went into an apartment to kill all the residents. Most of all, he needed to save the AK-47 for the work it did best. Killing Judges.

The Judges. As far as Jeffrey could see they were responsible for most of his problems. It was not that killing them had turned out to be so hard after all; with the voice to help him he could get the drop on them every time. No, it was a question of what the presence of the Judges had done to the citizens of this city. Accustomed to the Judges ruling every aspect of their

lives, the majority of the residents of Charles Whitman stayed in their apartments like frightened sheep. Some ran, of course, but they were the exception that proved the rule. As far as Jeffrey could figure it, he had been killing for an hour now - plenty of time for the other people in the block to make a run for it before he could even get to them.

Instead, they waited in their apartments, listening as the sounds of gunfire came inexorably closer, never once considering the fact if they ran for it en masse Jeffrey would have been hard-pressed to kill more than half of them before the others escaped. But they didn't run. They just huddled, frightened, behind doors that could not stop him, waiting for their precious Judges to come and save them. It proved something Jeffrey had always suspected: notwithstanding the fact some of them could cure cancer or build rockets to go up into space or do all kinds of other cool stuff, most people were pretty damned dumb when you came right down to it.

It's a shame more of them don't run, Jeffrey thought. Least that way I wouldn't have so many of them left to kill before I can call it a day. He became embarrassed as he realised no secrets could be kept from the voice. Uriel could hear his thoughts and might well view Jeffrey's flagging interest as an act of betrayal. It made Jeffrey feel guilty. The voice had been so good to him: showing him where the guns were, warning him, helping him against the Judges. Jeffrey might be really tired, but the last thing he wanted to do was inadvertently hurt his guardian angel's feelings.

There are two men in Apartment Thirty-Five-B. If the voice had heard Jeffrey's thoughts it gave no sign of it. *They practise unnatural and sinful acts on each other every night. Kill them, Jeffrey. Kill them both.*

"Sure thing," Jeffrey said breezily, hoping to gloss over his earlier lapse. "I'm getting kind of short of bullets though. Maybe I should go grab the guns from some of those dead Judges and start using them as well?"

No, the voice said. *Lawgivers have a self-destruct mechanism designed to activate if anyone but its Judge owner tries to fire it. It would blow your hand off, Jeffrey. You have enough bullets. Now, the men in Apartment Thirty-Five-B.*

The voice paused. It was longer than the last time when the voice had paused. Longer and *different*. Courtesy of their connection, at some level Jeffrey detected a strange and sudden nervousness on Uriel's part. It was almost as though the voice had become as frightened as the family in Twenty-C, or the woman from Forty-A, or anybody else who had died there

today. As though the voice had sensed something coming towards them that caused it unease. Some enemy it had particular reason to fear.

"Voice?" Jeffrey was concerned. "You've gone awful quiet. Is something wrong?"

She is here, Jeffrey, the voice said. *I hoped she would come to us. It is better to kill her here and now. Away from the lair.* The voice paused again as though conflicting emotions were warring within it. Then, the conflict was ended as fear and uncertainty coalesced into a command spilling over with boiling venom and hatred.

The psi-bitch is here, Jeffrey, the voice said. *Kill her. Kill her, now!*

ELEVEN

THE SHADOW OF ANGELS

It was even worse than she had expected. Standing crouched in a firing stance inside the elevator, her Lawgiver cocked and ready, Anderson looked out as the elevator doors opened on the thirty-eighth floor and saw a scene from a nightmare. There were dead bodies everywhere: the corpses of men, women, even children, lay strewn across the hallway alone or in small untidy heaps and piles like rubbish sacks awaiting collection. Charles Whitman Block had been turned into a slaughterhouse.

She saw dead faces staring up at her with unseeing eyes while their blood covered the floor and walls with drag marks and spatter. She smelt the stench of fresh blood and cordite, and something worse. As she moved from the elevator into the hallway, she felt a rush of emotions hit her as she was exposed to the psychic residue left by the carnage. Every step of the way the last memories and experiences of the bodies before her hung in the air like screaming ghosts: impressions of pain, fear and horror left indelibly imprinted on the victims' surroundings by the violence of their deaths. Above all else, she could feel a question hanging in the air. The same question each of the victims had screamed out in desperation in their minds before their deaths. A question, heavy with despair and incomprehension, which each of them had taken unanswered with them to their graves.

The question: why?

Not for the first time in her life, Anderson found it was a question she could not answer.

She moved further down the hallway, her eyes scanning her surroundings cautiously for signs of danger as she fought hard to prevent herself from being distracted by the waves of raw emotion boiling restlessly in the air about her. The victims' pain was everywhere. It threatened to overwhelm her. With every step she was assailed on every side by the silent testimony of the dead. Flashbacks. She felt stray images and fragments of memories - none of them her own - force their way into her mind. She saw images of terror, grief and loss. Children screaming. Loved ones dying. Pleas for mercy cut off by brutal gunfire. Most of all, she saw a recurring image play through her mind repeatedly. The image of a man wearing an overcoat and carrying a spit gun, his face hidden beneath a mask of congealing blood,

seen from a dozen different angles through the eyes of a dozen different victims. The killer. She saw him kicking his way through doors. Firing his spit gun. Writing on walls. Smiling.

Smiling. Her own anger rose inside her at the thought. The creep smiled every time he pulled the trigger. Anderson felt her eyes burn as her vision became clouded. Putting her hand to her face, she saw tears and realised she was crying. So much pain, so much horror, so much sorrow. Sometimes, it was almost too much for her to bear.

Get a grip, Cass, she told herself. You need to stay focussed and catch this creep before he kills again. She breathed deeply as she attempted to regain her equilibrium. Another thought occurred to her. Wait a minute, writing on walls?

There were words written in jagged letters on the walls all around her. At first she had been too caught up in the pain and sorrow of the dead to even notice, but now she could see them: words on the walls, written in the victims' blood, messages from the killer to his hunters.

I am the fire and the flame, one of the messages read. *I do not fear the darkness.* She saw another. *I am the sword that guards the gate. I sit in judgement.* And another. *I am the Angel who watches. I have weighed this city and found it wanting.* More than any other message though, amid the blood and the stillness and the silence she saw a single word repeated endlessly as though it spoke of some kind of reason for all the slaughter she could see before her.

Judged. She saw that word written over and over and over again in blood.

"Control to Anderson." After so long a period of silence, the sound of a voice over the radio unit on her belt almost made her jump. "Backup has arrived at the scene. They are en route to rendezvous with you on the thirty-eighth floor in approx-"

"Negative to that, Control." Keeping her Lawgiver warily pointed down the hallway ahead, Anderson took the radio from her belt and held it close to her mouth. "Tell them to cover the elevators and stairwells and work their way up floor-by-floor. I'll work my way down and see if I can drive the killer towards them."

"That's not procedure, Anderson," Control said. "You're alone in there. You need backup. Stop trying to be a hero."

"Believe me, Control, that's the furthest thing from my mind," she replied. "I've found evidence at the scene indicating the killings at Whitman

may be linked to the murders in the Sector House holding cubes. I don't know quite what we're dealing with here, but my instincts tell me it's a whole lot more than a simple futsie."

"No offence, Anderson." Control's voice was testy. "But I can't go violating procedure just on your instincts-"

"You want authorisation?" she cut him off. "Call Sector Chief Franklin - I'm sure he'll give it to you in spades. Anderson out." She broke the connection.

She knew she was taking a gamble by bringing Franklin in on this. After what she had seen during the meeting with Grimes, she had no way of knowing whether the Sector Chief would back her play or countermand her instructions and the order the cavalry sent in at once. If nothing else, though, there would be a delay while Control contacted Franklin and waited for his decision. A delay that would buy her the one thing she needed most right now: time.

Judged. The same word from the Sector House was written on the walls of Charles Whitman. Assuming on that basis that the killings here and at the Sector House were linked, Anderson needed to capture the futsie alive so she could question him. This was a priority any other Judges on the scene would be unlikely to share, especially given that the futsie had killed at least five of their fellow Judges already. Anderson did not necessarily think the local Judges would set out to intentionally kill her perp, but there was a hard way and an easy way to any capture, and with five Judges dead nobody was likely to offer the futsie the easy way. To top it off, there was the unsettling fact that a single perp had proved capable of killing five Judges in the first place. Even in Mega-City One, things like that rarely happened. Judges were too well trained and well equipped to be slaughtered so indiscriminately by some madman, no matter how many guns he had. "It's like the drokker's got eyes in the back of his head," she had heard a Judge say over the comm line. An exaggeration in the heat of a fire fight, maybe? Then again, there was ample evidence at the scene to suggest there was a lot more going on here than just a futsie on the rampage. The whole thing was too strange for that.

Strange. It had "Psi Division case" written all over it.

All right then, Anderson thought to herself. So it looks like I'm on my own against a Judge-killing psycho. I don't know where he is, what he really looks like, or even if he's watching me right here and now. Oh, and

he's armed with a spit gun and he's a mass murderer who's killed a minimum of several dozen people already. I've got to hand it to you, Cass, you sure know how to get yourself in the middle of these tricky situations.

Seeing the bodies of two Judges lying down the hallway, Anderson moved cautiously towards them, past a pile of corpses, her eyes sweeping from side to side and alert for any sign of movement from the doors alongside her. Kneeling beside the closest Judge, as she put her fingers to his neck to check his pulse she glanced at the name on his badge. *Hoskins*. He was dead. She noticed an entry wound in his back where a bullet had evidently slipped in-between the plasteen armoured plates inside his uniform. Then, she noticed the other Judge had been shot in the back as well.

Futsie must have got behind them somehow, she thought. For a moment she was tempted to read the Judge's lingering memories in search of answers, but she couldn't risk losing track of the physical world around her, no matter how briefly. The futsie could be anywhere; she had stay sharp and focussed. She glanced at the bloody drag marks criss-crossing the floor. Looks like he killed most of his victims in their apartments and then dragged them out into the hallway. But why? And Hoskins here looks to have been in his forties at least. An experienced Judge. No way he just walks blindly into an ambush and lets a perp get the drop on him. Unless...

Her mind raced and took flight, thoughts rushing in breathless staccato rhythms towards a conclusion. Two Judges shot in the back. Bodies lying everywhere. Bodies dragged from their apartments. Bodies alone or stacked haphazardly in piles. Extra work for the perp. No reason for it. Two Judges. Shot in the back. Bodies moved. *Why?*

The perp was using them for cover!

The psi-bitch, Jeffrey, she suddenly heard a strange voice whispering in malevolent urgency. Not audible. In her mind. *She knows. Kill her, Jeffrey. Kill her now!*

She heard the sound of bodies falling. From the corner of her eye she saw a bloodstained man rise smiling from the tangle of limbs of the corpse-pile behind her, but Anderson was already moving - diving toward the ground as bullets cut through the air above her. She rolled, firing her Lawgiver. She saw the man jerk as a bullet took him in the belly. She felt a sudden pain as something struck her in the shoulder. She fired again, wild this time, and saw the man drop his spit gun as a bullet hit his arm while two more

chewed up the ceiling above him. She saw his hand go to his pocket, emerging with a fist-sized metal ball. He threw it in her direction, the ball bouncing and skidding across the floor towards her.

A grenade! It seem to move towards her in slow motion. The creep's crazy, he'll kill us both.

It detonated, not with a bang but a whimper. Amazed, Anderson heard a soft fizzing noise and saw a black puff of smoke rise from the top of the grenade as it landed beside her and rolled to a halt.

A dud, she thought, still hardly believing it. Lucky, Cass. Lucky.

The tails of his overcoat flapping behind him, abandoning his fallen spit gun, the man turned to run away. Bringing her gun to bear, she thought she saw something, a shadow around him. Ignoring it, sighting in with her Lawgiver, Anderson fired low. She needed him alive. The bullet struck the futsie's thigh, causing him to stumble, but he regained his balance, turned a corner and disappeared out of sight.

Pulling herself to her feet to give chase, Anderson saw the spit gun still lying on the ground where the futsie had dropped it. Then she noticed a gouge cut into the eagle insignia on top of her right shoulder. No blood. The shoulder was sore, but it still worked. She realised the bullet must have been deflected by the insignia. Lucky again, she thought as she began to jog after the fleeing perp.

Better hope I haven't used up all my luck too soon.

Pain.

Jeffrey's right arm hung uselessly by his side. His leg hurt where the Judge's bullet had struck his thigh. He felt warm blood drip from the wounds in his back and belly where the other bullet had gone through him, mixing with the blood of his victims already staining his clothes. Worse, every time he drew breath he felt a burning pain deep inside him. It was agony. He knew something vital was broken. He wanted to stop running. He wanted to give in. To surrender. To fall down to his knees and beg for forgiveness. He wanted to lie down. He wanted to rest. But the voice...

The voice would not let him.

Turn right, the voice told him, guiding him as he stumbled uncertainly through the maze of the block's corridors. *Now, left. No, Jeffrey, your other left. Now left again. Quickly, Jeffrey. We must hurry. The psi-bitch is coming.*

"Please..." Jeffrey whispered, his own voice ragged and breathless. "Please, it hurts. Everything hurts... Please, you have to let me stop."

No! The voice screeched angrily. The sound was painful and unsettling, like the shriek of fingernails scraping on a blackboard, only a thousand times worse. It hurt Jeffrey even more than the pain from his wounds. *No! You will do what I tell you. You will follow my instructions. The psi-bitch is coming, Jeffrey. You will kill her.*

"But I tried..." Jeffrey moaned in quiet torment, like a child trembling before a raging parent. "She shot me, the grenade didn't work. I tried..."

You will try again. The voice was calmer now. Insistent. *And next time you will succeed. You will do as I tell you, Jeffrey. You will kill the psi-bitch for me. Then you can rest.*

"Please..." Jeffrey pleaded piteously. "I think I'm dying."

No, Jeffrey. The voice was patient. *You will not die. I will not allow it. Here, turn to your right. There! You see the apartment? Eighty-Eight-A, Jeffrey. Open the door.*

Legs all but faltering beneath him, Jeffrey went to the door and did as he had been told. The door was unlocked and the apartment was deserted. I must have missed them, Jeffrey thought. The people from this apartment, they must have run before I could get to them, leaving the door unlocked behind them. Among the furnishings of the apartment, he saw an easy chair, its cushions round, plump and inviting.

"Please." The word was almost a sob. "The chair. I need to sit down."

Yes, Jeffrey, the voice crooned softly to him. *But first move the chair so it faces the door. There. Good. Now you can sit down. You will sit here and wait for the psi-bitch to come, Jeffrey. Then, you will kill her. Oh, and Jeffrey? In case you were wondering, you will be needing the Magnum again.*

There was something riding the perp. Anderson was sure of it.

She had quite a glimpse of it as the perp ran away, in the split second before he rounded the corner in the corridor and disappeared. A shadow, dark and malignant; not cast on the walls or floor, but sitting on his shoulders as though it was riding on his back. As she moved towards the corner, Anderson wondered if it had been no more than a trick of the light. She had abandoned the idea almost as quickly as it occurred to her. She knew what she had seen. A shadow, invisible to anyone without psychic

powers, its presence every bit as unsettling and foreboding as the voice she had heard whispering in her head in the half-second before the futsie had emerged from the corpse-pile. The same voice she had heard whispering when she deepscanned Judge Brophy. A psychic entity. She was even more certain of that fact now than she had been before.

The entity must be using the futsie as some kind of proxy, Anderson thought, advancing cautiously on the corner with her Lawgiver ready to fire. I don't read this as a case of out-and-out psychic possession. It's more like the entity's sitting in the futsie's head, guiding him and influencing his actions. The thing's probably looking out for him as well. No wonder the creep managed to get the drop on so many Judges. But why all the killings? What's the entity after?

Crouching as she reached the edge of the corner, Anderson pulled her boot knife from its sheath with her left hand and carefully extended it around the corner until she could see a blurred image of the corridor beyond reflected in the silver surface of the blade. The coast was clear: there was no sign of the futsie. Standing, the knife still in her left hand, her Lawgiver in her right, Anderson turned around the corner and saw a blood trail running along the floor toward the corner of another corridor further down the hallway.

Okay, so now we play follow the leader, she thought. Looks like the perp's lost a lot of blood. No surprise there, considering I tagged him three times. Most perps would have surrendered by now, but with some kind of psychic creature in his head, pushing him on, Grud knows how long he can keep going before he collapses. I have to keep it tight, be careful, work it corner-by-corner and stay sharp. The futsie could be waiting for me anywhere.

Repeating the same procedure as she reached the next corner, Anderson used her knife blade as a mirror to scan the corridor beyond and make sure it was clear. Working corridor by corridor, corner by corner, she followed the blood trail snaking a twisted path through the labyrinth of block corridors. Her senses alert for any sign of ambush, she moved at a slow and cautious pace, until with three or four changes of direction behind her, she saw the blood trail reach an end at an apartment door.

Apartment Eighty-Eight-A, she thought, trying to keep her footfalls silent as she moved closer. Looks like he's gone to ground.

Replacing her boot knife in its sheath as she advanced towards the apartment, Anderson bypassed the door and laid her hand against the wall to the side of it as she tried to pick up stray psychic impressions from inside. The perp was in there - she could feel it. His mind seemed dim and distant to her - distant enough that she could not read his thoughts. It was as though something was partially shielding him from her powers. She could sense another presence in the apartment with him, shadowy and vile. The entity, she thought. All right, so I can sense it. The question now is, can it sense me at the same time?

There was the sound of a shot from within the apartment. Acting on instinct, Anderson dived for cover - her reflexes saving her life as a bullet blasted through the wall in front of her from inside the apartment and missed her head by a matter of inches. There were more shots. One. Two. Three. Four altogether, drilling a line of holes through the apartment wall as the gunman inside adjusted his aim to track her movement.

"Rapid Fire - Armour Piercing!" Lying prone on the floor where she had landed, Anderson activated her Lawgiver's ammunition selector by vocal command and returned fire. It looked like the entity could sense her, all right!

Firing blind, making a best guess estimate on the shooter's position inside the apartment, Anderson responded with a salvo of shots through the wall. It was instinct, as much an automatic reflex as diving for cover had been earlier. She was a Judge, and when Judges were shot at, they shot back. Remembering why she had come here, Anderson stopped firing. She wanted the perp alive.

Rolling to safety alongside the wall of the nearest apartment down the hallway, Anderson reloaded her Lawgiver and considered her next move. There were no more shots. Next door, the gun of the shooter in Apartment Eighty-Eight-A had fallen silent. Could be he's biding his time and waiting for me to come at him again, Anderson thought. Then again, maybe I hit him and he's bleeding to death, if he isn't dead already. She listened, then crawled slowly toward the apartment and laid her palm against the farthest edge of its wall. Nothing. She could not sense anything from inside Eighty-Eight-A.

Lot of good this does me. Stymied for a moment, she felt frustrated. It might just mean the perp's moved further back from the wall, or the entity's got better at blocking my powers. She reviewed the situation. She had the

perp cornered in an apartment on the thirty-eighth floor with no way out. The only problem was, assuming he was still alive, she had to go in there and get him - along the way contending with whatever the hell it was kind of hand-cannon the futsie had used to shoot at her through the wall in the first place. If she had been a Street Judge, there might have been other options. She would have been carrying a couple of stumm gas rounds - designed to incapacitate rioters - in her utility belt, not to mention being equipped with a respirator inside her helmet. But she was a Psi-Judge, and in common with most Psi-Judges, Anderson did not wear a helmet - they tended to interfere with psychic powers. Without a helmet and respirator, carrying Stumm gas rounds had always seemed a waste of time to her.

Until now, she thought wistfully. What I wouldn't give for some Stumm right about now.

"Hey, you in there," she shouted, hoping the futsie was listening. "You are surrounded. Surrender now and you won't be harmed. Throw out your guns, then come out with your hands in the air."

She listened again, but there was no response. Inside, the apartment was silent.

Damn. She shook her head. That always seems to work when Dredd does it. Maybe next time I see Old Stoneface, I'll have to ask him for some pointers.

"Anderson to Control." Taking the radio mike from her belt, she turned down the volume and whispered into it as she pressed the "send" button. "Requesting backup. I have the futsie cornered - he's holed up in Apartment Eighty-Eight-A on the thirty-eighth floor. I could do with some Stumm gas up here. Over."

"Roger that, Anderson." With the radio's volume turned down, it was hard to hear if there was a note of "I told you so" in Control's voice now she had asked for backup. "Have relayed your request to the other Judges at the scene. They are en route to your location. ETA: three minutes. Be advised I have contacted Sector Chief Franklin and you have his authorisation to take full operational control of the situation. Over."

"Acknowledged, Control." So Franklin backed me after all, she thought. Better late than never, I suppose. "Thanks for the update. Anderson out."

Three minutes. Given the situation, it seemed to her then that it might as well be a lifetime. Inside the apartment the perp was wounded and could be dying, assuming he was not dead already. He could be bleeding to death.

Right now, the perp might not have three minutes left - never mind the time it would take to get an assault set up, use the Stumm gas, then get him some medical treatment. No, every second counted. She needed the perp taken alive for questioning, and three minutes was just too long to wait.

To hell with the Stumm gas and backup, she thought. Guess I'm going to have to do this one the hard way and hope for the best.

Her decision was made. It looked like she was going to have to go through the door alone.

Jeffrey, the voice whispered to him, quietly at first.

Jeffrey. The voice grew louder and more insistent. There was an edge of anger to it now.

Jeffrey! It screeched at last, the sound in his head unleashing a stabbing pain like ten thousands migraines at once. *Stay awake!*

"Please..." Jeffrey whispered back to it in the darkness. "I'm so cold, so tired... Please let me sleep."

No, Jeffrey. The voice was relentless and brooked no argument. *You will stay awake. The psi-bitch is coming, Jeffrey. You must kill her before you can sleep.*

He was huddled in a small space, cold, shivering, cramped, in absolute darkness. The walls of his confinement were so tight around him, Jeffrey found he could hardly breathe. There was a humming in his ears. He had lost the Magnum, and in its place he could feel the weight of another gun in his hand - the metal so chill and frozen he could barely stand to touch it. He wanted to let go. His body hurt so much, he was so weak and tired. He wanted to rest, but the voice in his head was no longer his friend, his guide or his guardian angel. He wanted to sleep, but the voice would not let him.

Stay awake, Jeffrey. The voice was cruel to him. Heartless. Too late, Jeffrey realised it did not care whether he lived or died. *Stay awake. Kill the psi-bitch. Then you can sleep.*

"Please..." His own voice was so hoarse and pathetic he could hardly recognise it any longer. "Please..."

Shut up, Jeffrey. The voice could not be reasoned with. Its concerns were not his own. *You are talking aloud again. Shut up. The psi-bitch is coming. She will hear you.*

Cold. Pain. Discomfort. Darkness. Jeffrey could no longer remember where he was or how he had come to be there. His memories seemed

strange to him now: a shifting and indistinct shadowplay obscured through a black veil of incomprehension. He had been sitting in the chair in the apartment, firing the Magnum. But what had happened next? He remembered the sound of gunshots and the holes appearing in his side of the wall as the Psi-Judge fired back at him. He remembered the bullet hitting him in his chest, his legs moving in an uncontrollable reactive spasm that had pitched him out of his chair. He remembered crawling across the apartment floor as the voice in his head whispered something to him about finding a hiding place. After that he drew a blank. His memories failed him. He could not remember how he came to be trapped in darkness, his knees up against his chest, the walls of his prison close around his shoulders, his head bent forward as he felt cold tears running down his face. There was only the present. The discomfort. The pain. The darkness.

The fear.

Stay awake, Jeffrey, the voice whispered to him. It frightened him now. He was powerless to resist it. *The psi-bitch is coming. Stay awake.*

He heard a muffled crash, distantly recognising it as the sound of the apartment door being forced open. There was a long pause, then he heard the sound of footsteps drawing nearer. Closer. The footsteps grew louder. Closer. Someone was headed his way. Closer...

Soon, Jeffrey, the voice crooned eagerly in his head. *Soon it will all be over. Kill the psi-bitch and then you can sleep.*

Anderson kicked in the door and leapt into the apartment. She went into a forward roll, coming to a stop beside the sofa in the living room. Staying low, she used it for cover. So far, so good. No shots. No movement. No reaction. Either the perp was biding his time, he was too badly wounded to fire, or he was dead already.

All right, Cass. Keeping her head down, Anderson listened intently to the sounds of the apartment around her. So you managed the hard part - getting into the apartment without having your head blown off. Time to track down your perp.

She heard the distant hum of a refrigerator and the slow tapping sound of water dripping in the distance - nothing there to help her home in on the futsie. Cautiously, Anderson reached out with her psychic senses, careful to tread the fine line between accessing the psychic world and completely losing track of the more immediate dangers of the physical world around

her. But it was no use. Try as she might, she could detect no sign of the futsie. It was the same impasse she had faced earlier: it could either mean the futsie was already dead, or simply that the entity had become more skilled at hiding him from her. If she was going to find him, it seemed like she was going to have to do things the old-fashioned way.

She moved, leaping across the space between the sofa and the nearest available piece of cover - an easy chair. Next, she moved towards a table - checking the living room metre by metre, vantage by vantage, as she tried to draw the perp from hiding. Then, coming to another easy chair that was tipped on its side on the floor, Anderson saw that its back was stained with fresh blood while a blood trail led from the chair towards the kitchen.

"Anderson, Psi Division!" Staying in cover, she shouted toward the kitchen, hoping to attract the perp's attention. "I know you're injured. Surrender now and I'll see to it you get medical attention ASAP. You hear me? Throw your guns out. Let's end this thing now."

So much for that idea, she thought as the seconds passed and it became clear there would be no response from inside the kitchen. I suppose, considering he's been shot three times already, there wasn't much chance I'd be able to scare him into surrendering just by shouting at him. Still, it was worth a try.

Running to take cover by the side of the door leading from the living room into the kitchen, Anderson snapped a glance inside the kitchen to make sure the room was clear before moving through the doorway. The kitchen was a mess. There was water all over the floor and it had washed away the blood trail, obscuring the perp's track-of-movement. Noticing that the water seemed to be seeping from a cupboard underneath the sink, and spotting a bullet hole in the cupboard door, Anderson realised one of her armour-piercers must have shot through the living room wall and hit the apartment's water pipes. She noticed wire shelves and spilled food cartons lying in a jumbled pile in front of the refrigerator. There was blood on the handle of the refrigerator door.

The fridge doesn't look big enough to fit someone inside it, she thought. Could be a decoy - maybe he's hiding somewhere else and wants me to try the fridge to give him a clear shot. Then again, he could have been desperate enough to stuff himself inside the fridge and risk freezing to death. Guess there's only one way I'm ever going to be certain.

She moved closer, hearing the wet sound of her own footfalls echoing around the kitchen. Closer. Her Lawgiver ready in her right hand, she stretched out her left towards the refrigerator's door handle. Closer...

Now! The voice screamed in sudden urgency, the sound cutting through the fog of Jeffrey's confusion and spurring him to action. *Now! Kill her, Jeffrey, kill her now!*

It happened so quickly. She heard a strange voice screaming inside her mind. *Kill her! Kill her! Kill her!* Then, as the voice's insane mantra reached a crescendo, the refrigerator door sprang open as the perp emerged from hiding. Stopping the door with her palm, Anderson put her entire weight against it to force it shut, catching the futsie half out of the refrigerator, his arms caught between his body and the inside of the door as the two of them pushed from either side against it. She saw the futsie's mouth open, his eyes wild, his voice screaming in pain and rage. She heard her own voice ordering him to drop his weapon. She felt the strain as the contest of strengths continued. She saw the futsie work his left arm free. She saw the gun in his hand: an antique semi-automatic pistol, grey and deadly. The gun turned toward her in slow motion, the barrel a yawning black chasm, ready to swallow her life whole. She saw the barrel moving closer. Her own gun was caught underneath her, jammed against the refrigerator door as she fought to stop the futsie from freeing himself. Closer. The futsie fired too soon, the shot going high and wide past her shoulder. Closer. He was getting ready to fire again; another micro-second and the gun would be pointing at her head. Closer. Too close. She did what she had to and pulled the trigger of her Lawgiver. Rapid fire, the sounds of the firing muffled as she pressed the barrel against the refrigerator door and shot through it at the futsie.

Six bullets. Staring death directly in the face she could have fired a thousand.

Six bullets. She saw the face of the futsie: shocked, confused, an expression of understanding slowly dawning as he realised he had been shot. She saw the gun fall from his hand as his fingers went limp. She saw him spit up blood, leaving a red stain on the clean white surface of the refrigerator door. She saw his head loll back, his features going slack. He was dying. She stepped back, releasing the door without thinking. With nothing left to hold him in place, the futsie's body pitched forward, spilling

out of the refrigerator to land on his side before rolling onto his back. He looked up at her, eyes glazing over, mouth huffing out ragged and incomplete breaths. Anderson knelt beside him and saw a tight group of six entry wounds in his torso alongside the wounds of his earlier injuries. Six bullets. Six hits. She had hit the target with every shot.

"Please..." A low moan escaped his lips. His breathing became shallow and laboured. Pulling off her glove, Anderson laid a hand across his forehead. It was not a gesture of comfort. She could do nothing to help him now - the futsie was as good as dead - but if she was going to understand what had happened here, she needed to see his memories. She needed to read his mind, preferably while he was still alive. She needed to-

She saw something, a shadow growing on the floor beside the futsie's body as though darkness was bleeding out of him in place of blood. Before she could react, the shadow grew larger, expanded and rose up to engulf her. Trapped inside it, it was as though she was blinded. There was no apartment, no wet floor, no open refrigerator with packets of foodstuffs lying broken before it, no futsie, only all-encompassing darkness. Black. Lightless. It was as though she was at the bottom of some limitless abyss.

Then, she heard it: a voice, whispering in the darkness, the words quiet and indistinct. Instinctively, she recognised it. It was the entity, whispering to her as it had whispered to the futsie and Judge Brophy before her. Still blind, she felt shadowy tendrils brush against her in the darkness as the entity reached out to try to invade her mind.

Cassandra Anderson. She heard it calling to her, the sound a barely audible murmur.

Cassandra Anderson. It had a strange voice, malign and knowing.

Cassandra Anderson...

Raising her psychic defences, she resisted. Using her mind she erected a telepathic wall around her, blocking out the invasion. On the other side of the wall she sensed the entity as it squirmed against the barrier to test it, attempting to find a weakness. She felt its hunger and heard the soundless workings of what might have been some kind of sense organ moving against the barrier, tasting it. The entity's hunger grew stronger. It pushed against the barrier, searching for some chink or flaw in her defences. It pushed again, harder. Then, harder again. She felt a pain in her mind, as though something hard and sharp was stabbing into her brain. Still, she resisted. The barrier held. The entity could not get to her.

Please... She heard another voice in her mind. The futsie. The sound of it was small and distant, a waning echo. She felt the entity grow distracted, losing interest in her as it eagerly turned towards the dying man instead. She heard other sounds, not real sounds, she realised, but her mind's attempt to represent the sensations coming to her through her psychic senses. The sounds were indescribable, outside the normal register of human experience. Wet. Hungry. Insatiable. She heard a scream. It was the futsie. She felt waves of terror hit her as he gave out a psychic scream. Horrified, Anderson felt the entity move towards the futsie and heard a sucking noise as the creature began to feed upon him. She heard the futsie scream once more, the sound of a soul in torment as the entity fed on the man's diminishing life force - greedily feasting on the futsie's fear and terror at the point of his death. In little more than half a second it was over. With a despairing psychic screech the futsie was gone, sucked dry, annihilated. It was almost as though he had never existed at all.

But worse was to come.

She heard another sound like a rush of air. No, not air. It was the sound of more screams, dozens of them, shrill and terrified. Feeling an immense surge of psychic energy moving around her, Anderson realised what was happening. It was the futsie's victims - the entity was feeding on their souls just as it had on the soul of their killer. It was pulling them towards it, creating a maelstrom of wailing souls with the entity at its centre. Appalled, unable to intervene, for an instant Anderson heard soul after screaming soul screech past her in helpless despair to be consumed by the entity in turn. Then, as with the futsie, it was over. The maelstrom dissipated. The screams died away. In the aftermath, as the entity was momentarily sated, there was silence.

The darkness receded, her sight returned, and Anderson found herself still kneeling beside the futsie's body in the apartment's kitchen. They were psychic events, she realised dully, staring down at the corpse before her. The sounds, the screams, the darkness, all of them. They had no physical aspect. If it wasn't for my powers, I wouldn't have realised anything was happening at all. Beside her, the futsie's body seemed hollow, empty, a soulless husk. At last, she understood what had happened to the dead perps in the Sector House holding-cubes. The entity had fed on them, absorbing their souls and obliterating every last trace of their memories and emotions. It was the worst fate that could befall a sentient being. Soul death. The

ultimate and final demise. When the entity claimed its victims it claimed them completely, utterly destroying everything that had once made them human and leaving nothing but discarded empty shells behind it. It was monstrous. Horrific.

Inhuman.

As the darkness receded further, Anderson saw tendrils of shadow pull back to coalesce and take on a coherent form in front of her. She saw a dark humanoid figure standing over her, black wings at its back, its body made of shadows. Its face was a featureless black oval, though as it stood looking down on her, Anderson had the uncomfortable impression it was smiling. For a moment they stared at each other, then, with a sound like the beating of dark wings, the figure disappeared.

It was over. For what seemed the longest time, she knelt there in silence as questions churned unanswered through her mind. Slowly she became aware of other sensations: the sound of dripping water, the hum of the refrigerator, the damp against her legs where the water covering the kitchen floor had soaked through her uniform. She stood up, casting a last sad glance at the body of the futsie. Her questions would not leave her. Above all else, she found herself unsettled by something she had seen in the brief time when she and the entity had faced each other. She had glimpsed the creature for barely more than a moment. A few seconds at most. It had been long enough for her to see something that had disturbed her. It had been only the briefest of glimpses, and she had no way of knowing what kind of creature the entity really was.

For a moment, she could have sworn it looked just like an angel.

TWELVE

AFTERMATH

"I got Med-Judge Geddes on the line," the Street Judge said, unconsciously cupping his hand to the side of his head as a report came in over his helmet radio. "Says he's found another two bodies in Apartment Forty-nine-A up on the thirty-eighth. What's that make it for confirmed dead so far? A hundred and thirteen?"

"One hundred and fourteen," Anderson said. The number taunted her, bringing with it the subtle accusation of failure. "You forgot about the futsie. He's as much a victim here as anyone else."

"A hundred and fourteen. Right." The Street Judge seemed almost disgruntled, as though including a dead perp in the calculation revealed her as some kind of dangerous liberal. Barely concealing his dissatisfaction, he turned away. "Hell of a mess." He nodded towards the bloody writings covering the hallway walls as Tek-Judges made measurements and scraped away samples for analysis. "Futsies, eh? Grud knows what gets into them."

"Grud knows," Anderson echoed him. Brooding, lost in her thoughts, she hardly noticed him walk away.

Once backup had arrived, order had quickly been restored to Charles Whitman Block. After the slaughter came the cleanup. Standing in a hallway on the thirty-seventh floor, Anderson watched as her fellow Judges went about the routine duties that came in the aftermath of any major incident. The floors of the block where the futsie had embarked on his killing spree had been cordoned off, while the surviving residents had been evacuated to other floors for the Street Judges to take their statements, or to be ferried to hospital to be treated for injuries and shock. Around her, while a team of Med-Judges went from body to body to check for vital signs, Tek-Judges prowled the hallways performing the myriad tasks of crime scene forensics. The positions of bodies and discarded cartridge cases were recorded and marked, bullets were recovered from walls and doorjambs, swab samples were taken from blood trails and spatter: evidence was collected, collated, cross-indexed. Accustomed to living in a city where every citizen was a potential powder keg, to the Judges of Sector 12 it was business as usual. For Anderson though, it now seemed far more than just

another case - even granting that it had never been an ordinary case to begin with.

It feeds on human souls. As the memory of her encounter with the entity played across her mind, Anderson found herself forced to suppress an involuntary shudder. That's the reason for all this slaughter. It used the futsie like a farmer planting seeds. It made him kill all these people; then, when the futsie died, it harvested them all. That's what all this was in aid of. A harvest of souls.

Troubled by the thought, she shivered. In the wake of the futsie's death, she had come to a clearer understanding of the scale of the carnage at Charles Whitman Block. So far, the death toll stood at one hundred and fourteen and rising. Two entire block floors had been turned into a slaughterhouse. Worse, when she had tried to scan the bodies of those killed in the futsie's rampage, Anderson found had all her darkest fears confirmed. Every one of them was as blank and empty as the body of the futsie. They were hollow shells, just like the dead perps back at the Sector House. Although Anderson had finally found at least some of the answers she had been seeking, they seemed a scant consolation when compared to the enormity of the human tragedy before her.

I wonder how old she was? Looking down at the bullet-riddled corpse of a young woman lying on her side on the floor, Anderson removed a glove and stooped to kneel beside her. Maybe twenty-one? Normally, I'd only have to put my hand to her head to scan her and I'd know the answer to that question. I'd have known what her name was, what music she liked, what her dreams were. I'd be able to feel everything she felt when she died. What she thought, what she heard, what was the final thing she saw before the lights went out. Normally, I'd be able to know all that and more. But there's nothing normal about this. There's nothing normal about shredding human beings' souls at the point of death to feed on them and leaving no trace of anything behind.

She knew it would not work, but from long habit Anderson laid her hand across the woman's forehead and tried to scan her. It was pointless. She might as well have been trying to read an inscription in a blank lump of stone. No, she thought, sadly, there's nothing left of her. So much for life after death.

Moving her hands to the woman's arm, Anderson tried to bend it at the elbow, only to find the arm was stiff and unresponsive. She tried the other

arm, then the legs. In each case the result was the same. The woman's limbs were locked frozen into place and would not budge.

It's just like Henderson talked about back at the morgue. Replacing her glove, Anderson stood and walked away, deep in thought. Premature rigor mortis, just like the dead perps in the Sector House. Nobody burned to death this time, though. Maybe the entity needs to be close to its lair to be able to burn them. Maybe that's why it had to use the futsie as a proxy.

Noticing one of the Tek-Judges using the scanalyser eyepiece on his helmet to take Tri-pics of the bloody messages on the hallway walls, Anderson tapped him on the shoulder.

"Make sure you send a copy of those tri-pics to MAC for analysis," she told him. "I want a complete textual analysis of the content of the messages."

"You think they might find a match with something in the archives?" the Tek-Judge asked. MAC was the Justice Department's mainframe computer and its archives included records of every crime committed in the history of Mega-City One, not to mention the personal details of every citizen who lived there. "That's kind of a long shot."

"Right now, long shots are about all I've got left." Anderson shrugged. "Could be there's some kind of pattern to these messages we're not seeing." She pointed to the wall. "See this one here? 'I am the flame of He Who Rules The Heavens. I am the righteous sword of fire, come to punish the transgressor.' That's not Mega-City One perp-speak. It sounds like it comes from some kind of religious text. If MAC can identify the text, it might bring me closer to identifying the entity responsible for all this slaughter."

"Entity?" The Tek-Judge looked at her strangely. "I thought it was a futsie did all the killing?"

"It's complicated," she shrugged again. It had been a long night and she felt too tired to answer questions. "Psi Division business. Just send the Tri-pics to MAC and let me know if anything comes of it."

"You're the boss." The Tek-Judge's hand went to the comm-switch just inside his helmet as he made an adjustment to his helmet radio to send the Tri-pics digitally to MAC via secure transmission. "It'll take a few minutes. Whole sector's so busy the increased comms-traffic is restricting the bandwidth."

"Busy?" She checked her watch. "I make it after 10:00. Graveyard shift's over. Thing's should have quieted down by now."

"Normally, yeah." This time it was the Tek-Judge's turn to shrug. "Seems nobody told the perps that. Violent incidents are up all across the sector. Must be some kind of freak crime wave. It happens sometimes." He lowered his hand from his helmet and turned away to resume his work. "There. I'm sending the data to MAC now. When I get the results through I'll let you know."

A freak crime wave, Anderson thought. I wonder if there's any connection between it and the entity's presence? If not, it's one hell of coincidence. Maybe I should get in touch with Sector Chief Franklin, ask him to order a review of last night's crime stats to see if there's any kind of pattern to the increase. If there is, it might give me a better handle on what we're dealing with here. Though if the entity is somehow affecting the entire sector, you've got to wonder how it's managing it. Just how powerful is this thing?

Questions. They never ended. It seemed to Anderson that for every question that had been answered following her encounter with the entity, another dozen took their place. Granted, she knew the entity fed on human souls, but she was no closer to discovering its true nature. Just what kind of creature was it? She did not have an answer. All she had were more questions, buzzing insistently in her brain without respite. What was the entity's connection to the Sector House? Why when she saw it did it look like an angel? Why had it started by killing perps, then tried to drive Judge Brophy to suicide, before using the futsie Jeffrey Queeg as its proxy in the killings at Charles Whitman? How could she stop it? Question upon question, and not one of them with anything even resembling an answer in sight.

Jeffrey Queeg.

It occurred to her that her best option was probably to start with what she knew already and work her way forward from there. The futsie seemed as good a place to start as any. Fingerprints and a DNA sample had identified him as Jeffrey Lionel Queeg, a resident of Charles Whitman. For a moment Anderson considered the brief facts she had learned about the dead man from Justice Department records after the Tek-Judges had ID'd him. Queeg was unemployed, unmarried, with no known dependents. No criminal record, which pretty much made him a model citizen in the Big Meg. The real question was, why had the entity chosen Queeg to be his pawn? Was there something specific about him, some special characteristic or flaw that

had made Queeg particularly vulnerable to the entity's influence? Or had it simply been a random process?

Better hope it's not random, she thought. If it is, I'm right back where I started.

"Control to Anderson." The sound of Sector Control calling to her over her radio unit interrupted her train of thought.

"Anderson receiving." As she pulled the radio unit from her belt and waited for Control's response, Anderson noticed the hiss of static over the line was far worse than usual. Bandwidth problems, she thought. Looks like the Tek-Judge was right about there being a lot more comms-traffic in the sector.

"I don't know if it's relevant to your investigation, Anderson," Control said, "but I've just come across some further background on your dead futsie, Jeffrey Queeg. Seems he visited the Sector House last night trying to reclaim some lost property. Check-In was backlogged, so he ended up waiting for around ten hours before he finally gave up and went home. The exit logs have him leaving the Sector House at 6:23."

"6:23 this morning?" Anderson remembered the lights going out at the Sector House, the race down the stairway to the holding-cubes, and the mystery of why there had been no more burnings. "But that would mean he left the Sector House around the time the last power cut ended."

"That's right," Control said. "Surveillance cameras show him waiting by the front exit when the power came back on. Like I said, I don't know if any of this is relevant to your case. But I figured you'd want to hear about it either way. Control out."

The hiss of static over the radio unit grew louder as Control broke the connection, but Anderson was no longer listening. Instead, she considered what she had just learned and wondered whether it might be the beginning of some kind of breakthrough. Queeg was at the Sector House, she thought. That's why the entity chose him. Maybe it's power is limited somehow. Maybe it's tied to the Sector House in some way I don't understand yet, and that's why it had to use a proxy. Either way, if it's true that its power is limited, then that means there must be some way to stop it.

"Anderson!" She heard a shout as the Tek-Judge came hurrying back towards her. "I just got the results back on that text analysis you asked for. You hit paydirt. Wait a second... MAC is sending me more files." The Tek-Judge's hand moved to the side of his head as he scrolled through the

incoming information on the drop-down info-display inside his helmet. "Hmm, there's a lot of it."

"Just give me the edited highlights," she told him. "If I need any further details I'll ask."

"Okay." The Tek-Judge began again in a distracted tone as he skimmed through the files on his display. "Looks like you were right about the religious angle. MAC calculates a ninety-seven per cent correlation between the wording of the messages on the wall and phrases from *The Testament of Jaron* - an apocryphal text used by the Jaronite Brethren, a sub-sect of a heretical splinter group that broke away from the Church of the Original Holy sometime in the mid Twenty-first century. Vatican Inquisitors killed most of them, but a small group made it to Mega-City One and were granted religious asylum. By all accounts, they're a bunch of zealots. When the Jaronites first made it to MC-1 they tried to recruit converts, but you know that whole fire and brimstone number doesn't go down too well in the Big Meg and they've stayed a pretty small sect in the years since. MAC puts their current membership at maybe three-dozen or so, give or take, with most of those members drawn from the original refugees and their descendants. You know, it always gets me how these religious types keep on believing in this stuff even long after it's clear nobody else is buying-"

"Edited highlights, remember? Keep to the point. You want to discuss the nature of religious faith, we'll have to do it some other time."

"Oh, right." If the Tek-Judge was disappointed he gave no sign of it. "Okay, then. According to the files all that 'flame of heaven' and 'sword of fire' stuff refers to an angel named Uriel. He's one of the four archangels - whatever the Grud they are - and he's supposed to be tasked with watching over the Earth and punishing mankind for its sins. You want to hear the rest of this?"

"Go on." Anderson could feel a tingling sensation on her scalp as though her instincts were trying to tell her something.

"Right. Well this Uriel is supposed to be the angel that Grud sent to guard the Garden of Eden to make sure Adam and Eve didn't try sneaking back in after they got thrown out over that apple business. In some of the religious sources he's identified as 'the destroyer of armies' and 'the angel who watches over thunder and terror'. Basically, a real bad-ass, angelically speaking."

An angel, Anderson thought. Remembering the shadowy, winged figure of the entity standing over her, she was once more forced to suppress a shudder. It ties in with what I saw all right. But this thing can't be that straightforward. Even if we assume this Uriel really exists, how the hell did he end up stealing souls in Mega-City One? There's another piece of the puzzle I'm just not seeing. I'm missing something. She felt the tingling on her scalp again, but no matter how much she tried to open up to what her unconscious was trying to tell her, it did no good.

"Anderson?" It was the Tek-Judge. Abruptly, Anderson realised she had fallen so deeply into her own thoughts that she had lost track of what he was saying. "I'm sorry, Baines." She noticed the name on the Tek-Judge's badge. "I was a million kilometres away from here for a moment. Please, go on. Tell me what you were saying again?"

"I was saying MAC found another correlation in the archives." As Tek-Judge Baines scrolled through more files on his helmet display, his voice grew excited. "It's an even better match this time. A ninety-*nine* per cent correlation between the content and prose style of the messages on the walls here and the diary of one Morris Arthur Weems."

"Weems? I don't know the name. How come he rates a place in the archives?"

"Weems was a perp," the Tek-Judge said. "Killed by a Judge fleeing the scene of a firebombing at Flynt Plaza - that's right here in Sector 12 - fifteen years ago. When his apartment was searched after the shooting, the diary was found and one of the Tek-Judges on the scene must have decided to scan it into the archives. Apparently, Weems had been a member of the Jaronites until he had a falling out with the church hierarchy - claimed they were too soft. And there's something else." Baines paused and licked at his lips as though his mouth had suddenly gone dry. "The Street Judge who shot and killed Weems was Judge William Brophy."

Brophy! Anderson felt a lurch in her stomach as the name hit her like a bullet. She had no idea as yet what it meant, but she was sure this was the missing piece of the puzzle.

And, if it was, then it was time for her to get moving.

"Contact MAC and have it forward copies of every file it has on Weems and Uriel to my bike computer." Turning away from the Tek-Judge, Anderson shouted back to him over her shoulder as she hurried toward the

block elevators. "Make sure you send copies to Chief Franklin and Deputy Grimes as well, marked Urgent: Priority One-Alpha."

"Sure, if you say so." Startled by her sudden exit, the Tek-Judge called after her, but she was no longer listening. She had no time to spare. "Anderson, where are you going?"

Call it a hunch, intuition, or even a premonition, but Anderson was now sure there was only one place where she would find the answers to her questions. She was headed back to the place where it all began, back to where her investigation had started. Back to the place where, finally, all roads seemed to be leading her.

Back to Sector House 12.

THIRTEEN

URIEL RISING

It was time, and Uriel was ready.

Deep inside the darkness of his hiding place in Sector House 12, he shifted his many limbs and prepared to take the next great step forward to the achievement of his aims. The sinners he had punished in the holding-cubes and at Charles Whitman had only been the beginning. Small steps, designed to temporarily sate his hunger and to give him the energy he needed to set about his work in earnest. There were sinners all around him. He could feel them in the rooms and cubes of the Sector House, and in the blocks and streets of the wider city beyond it. The entire world was sick with sin. Even here, alone in the darkness, he could sense it clearly. The world and the city were worthless. Morally diseased. Decadent. Corrupted beyond measure of hope or salvation. The world was a sinkhole. A stinking cesspit of damnation. But through circumstance and the grace of Grud, Uriel had been granted the weapons to purge it of both sin and sinners.

Circumstance. Unbidden, through the fog of his memory, remembrance came to him. He had been a man once, that thought was clear to him. He remembered pain. He remembered his body shaking, the ground cold beneath him, a vast and encroaching darkness growing deeper and blacker around him as he grew more fearful. He remembered screaming out silently in rage and resentment. He remembered the sound of a voice in the darkness, answering him, whispering to him - the sound not unlike his own voice now, the voice he used to speak to sinners at the moment of judgement. With that, his memories become more uncertain. He remembered falling and the fear his life would be extinguished. Next, after what now seemed a timeless eternity, he awoke once more in the darkness and found himself transformed, granted a new body, new senses, new powers to better aid him in his struggles against evil. And with it, something else.

A new hunger.

It was a terrible thing, the hunger. It burned inside him constantly. It was endless and demanding. It gave him no peace. He felt it through every fibre of his being, through every moment and movement of his body. Even when he had taken the sinners in Charles Whitman, Uriel had known his hunger

would not be placated for long. It was insatiable, remorseless, a craving for sustenance that knew no bounds. It raged inside him, restless and dissatisfied, without respite. At times, the hunger seemed so huge it was as though he lived within it rather than it living inside him. At times, it was as though the hunger owned him completely - as though he had been made only as a slave to serve its needs. Whenever that thought came to him he cast it angrily aside. He was the master here; he was slave to nothing, least of all to himself. He was Uriel. The flame of Grud. The angel of vengeance. His eyes were the eyes of judgement. His hand wielded the swift and merciless sword of retribution. He did not fear the darkness. Whatever had become of the man he had once been, it was clear he had been brought to this new form of life for only one purpose: to fulfil the terms of his mission and to punish the world for its sins.

It was time. Time to take the next step forward. Time to begin the work in earnest.

Once he had been a man. Once, he had been forced to rely on merely four limbs and five senses. No longer did he need to labour under such pathetic restrictions. He had new limbs and senses, vastly different to any he had known before. It was a feature of his new existence that Uriel now had a multitude of both limbs and senses. Using his senses, he extended his perceptions to every corner of the building around him. He could feel the Sector House and everything inside it: the holding pens, med-bay, Check-In, the Judges' dormitories and living quarters. There were sinners everywhere. Courtesy of his senses, Uriel could see into the hearts and minds of every living creature around him. He could see everything: the secret fears and anxieties, the desires, the sins that would serve to damn every last one of them to hell. He could see it all, every disgusting act and sinful pleasure any of them had ever even as much as considered. They were sinners. They must be judged. They must be punished.

It was time. Inside him, the hunger beat a relentless tattoo like a restless animal throwing itself against the bars of its cage.

He extended his senses further, past the world of flesh and bodies, to the unseen world existing around it. He saw the dance of electrons as streams of electricity flowed through the wires and conduits of the Sector House power supply. Fluid in the darkness, his own form moved and shifted.

It was time. The hunger would not be put off a moment longer.

He stretched out his limbs.

Basement sub-level three. A sudden electromagnetic surge knocks out the Sector House's generators. Backup systems fail. As the lights go out and the entire Sector House above falls into darkness, amid the rumbles of discontent and expressions of anger the thought in every mind is the same. It is happening again...

He stretched out his limbs.

The holding pens. In the wake of the loss of power, the mood among the prisoners in the pens changes and becomes ugly. A storm of hatred rises. Quiet at first, then growing louder, fists begin to drum angrily against cell bars and walls in a cacophony of protest. A riot is brewing.

He stretched out his limbs.

The sector chief's office. Sitting at his desk, Chief Franklin hears stealthy footsteps approaching and looks up from his paperwork in concern. A shadow falls across his face. A dark figure stands before him, the blade of a knife raised above his head...

He stretched out his limbs.

The Judges' dormitories. In his bed, Judge Victor Sharff wakes abruptly from a whispering voice in his dreams to the realisation that the other Judges in the bunks and rooms around him are sinners. Taking the pillow from his bunk, Sharff moves to the sleeping Judge closest to him and presses it down onto his face. When the arms of the man spasm and grow still, Sharff moves on to the next victim, and the next. He is not alone. Elsewhere in the dormitories Judges Witter, Vindal and Montoya awake from similar dreams to the same realisation. Soon, they will join Sharff in his work...

He stretched out his limbs.

The check-in desk. Gripped by a strange hysteria, the citizens waiting in the reception area suddenly explode into violence. They turn on each other with fists and kicks, tearing the plasteen seating apart to use as makeshift clubs. The injured fall screaming and bleeding to the ground. When the Check-In Judges venture from behind their bullet proof screen to quell the disturbance, some wade in with daysticks while others draw their Lawgivers. Shots are fired. More screams fill the air...

He stretched out his limbs.

Med-bay. As a Med-Judge loosens the restraints on Judge Brophy's arm to give him an injection, Brophy abruptly emerges from his catatonia and attacks her. Knocking the Med-Judge unconscious, Brophy grabs the las-

scalpel from her belt and cuts himself free. As other med-staff rush to restrain him, Brophy jams the las-scalpel into a nearby oxygen tank. His last words, as the oxygen tank explodes in a bright white flash of fire are: "We are sinners. We must be judged!"

Uriel stretched out his limbs.

Tek-bay. Admin. Accounting. The comm-centre. All across the Sector House, the drama is repeated. Judges, citizens, perps, all awaken to the sudden realisation that the people around them are sinners. There is violence. Punishment. Retribution. And, deep in the darkness, Uriel senses the flow of souls towards him and smiles. It is all going splendidly.

He stretched out his limbs and took the Sector House for his own.

FOURTEEN

ANATOMIES OF DISASTER

"Code Ninety-Nine Red." The voice of Sector Control over her bike radio was shrill with panic. "Judges down. Reporting multiple incidents at Sector House 12. Holy Grud!" There was the sound of a shot, then a muffled scream and the noise of a struggle. Abruptly, Control's voice grew distant as though the controller had moved away from his station. "The drokker's gone crazy! Somebody restrain- Patterson? What do you think you're do- No! Don't-"

More shots. Then a squall of feedback, followed by the hiss of static as the voices of Sector Control and the sounds of whatever in hell was happening there were abruptly lost as the connection was broken. Riding her bike along the Brando skedway en route to the Sector House from Charles Whitman, Anderson tried switching through all the frequencies used for local Sector House comms. Dead air and static. It was the same on every channel. Whatever was going on at Sector House 12, it was clear the comm-centre was out of business.

"Judge Anderson to Central Control." Setting her bike radio to route its signal through an out-of-sector relay, Anderson switched across the channels to one reserved for direct communication with Justice Department's headquarters at the Grand Hall of Justice. "Reporting Judges down and a possible emergency situation at Sector House 12. The nature of the emergency is at this time unclear, but I am on the way to the scene to investigate. ETA: three minutes. Over."

"Acknowledged, Anderson," Central Control responded. "We received reports of a power outage and violent incidents at Sector House 12, then all comms went down and we lost contact. We are now re-routing street level comms through Sector House 11. Please advise when you have more information. Over."

"Will do, Control. Anderson out."

Hitting the accelerator and siren simultaneously, Anderson gunned her bike towards her destination. With comms down, she would only be able to find out what was going on at Sector House 12 once she reached it. All the same, as her bike hurtled past civilian vehicles that pulled aside to let her

pass, she felt a growing sense of unease as she wondered what kind of situation she would face when she arrived.

Given what she had heard over her radio, it sounded like the entire Sector House had just gone crazy.

"Grud on a bike. Listen to them," Judge-Warder Cates said, his voice barely audible over the sound of perps hammering on the bars and walls of their holding pens. "I've never heard anything like it."

"Shut up, Cates," Chief Sykes said. "I hear you take the Lord's name in vain again, you're on a charge." Abruptly, Sykes found himself wondering why he had just said that - he had never been a particularly religious man. He shook his head. Guess the noise must be getting to me, he thought. It's like they say: there's no atheists in foxholes.

The lights had gone out ten minutes ago. Unlike the previous occasions when it had happened, after a few initial outbursts, there had been no screams from the holding-cubes. Instead, the perps in the overcrowded holding pens had begun to pound on the walls and bars around them, creating a deafening and unsettling avalanche of continuous noise. Having failed to quell the disturbance with the threat of dispensing extra cube-time to every prisoner, Sykes had ordered his men to assemble in full riot gear in the corridor and beat their shockprods against their riot shields in the hope of frightening the perps into submission. It had not worked - the cacophony coming from the pens drowned out their efforts. Moving the beam of his torch across the pens, Sykes saw hundreds of perps glaring at him from the darkness with fixed and glassy-eyed stares, their hands broken and bleeding from pounding their fists against the bars. And still the noise continued.

"It's like they're in some kind of trance." Cates shifted nervously beside him. "It's like they're waiting for something. Like they know something we don't."

"Quiet," Sykes grunted at him. "I'm not telling you again, Cat-" He became aware of another sound. This one more quiet, the low humming noise of electricity moving through the Sector House's power lines. "There, you hear that? The power's started coming on again. Crisis over. If the perps don't stop their noise when the lights come back on, we'll hit them with some stumm gas. See how they like that-"

He paused again, distracted by a series of metallic clicks coming from the locks on the doors to the holding pens. Then, incredibly, as Sykes and the

other Judge-Warders watched it in mounting horror, the pen doors slid open as though of their own volition.

"The doors!" He heard another voice raised in panic. It was Murcheson this time. "The electronic locks are operating all by themselves!"

"Form up on me," Sykes shouted, fighting to make himself heard above the din as maddened perps poured through the opening doors and charged towards them. "Form up. Shockprods on full. Anything that moves is a target. Raise shields and forward!"

Adopting a wedge formation, the Judge-Warders advanced and counter-charged the onrushing perps. As the two groups met and tore into each other, things quickly became confused. Striking one man in the groin with his shockprod as he hit another in the face with his shield edge, Sykes found himself surrounded by chaos. He heard the sounds of men screaming and the *crack* of breaking bones, saw brief blue flashes flare in the darkness as his men used their shockprods. Then, it was as though everything was frozen as he heard someone calling his name, quiet and indistinct. A voice whispering in the darkness. Listening to it, Sykes felt a dark certainty take root inside him that become stronger by the second.

"Form up on me," he yelled. In the heat of the melee, his men had lost their formation and were in danger of being overwhelmed. "Form up. Lethal force permitted! Let's show this scum we mean business." He felt the certainty grow yet stronger and more compelling. He could not resist it. "Kill them," he screamed. "Kill the perps. Kill them all."

"They are sinners. They must be *judged*!"

It was only afterwards, picking himself up off the floor in the wake of the explosion, that it occurred to Whitby that the unfortunate incident earlier in the morning when he had brained Judge Brophy with his daystick had probably saved his life. If not for that, Whitby would not have had to endure hours of questioning before SJS Judge Hass had finally seen fit to release him. And, if not for Hass's questioning, Whitby would no doubt have been on time for his appointment in med-bay for a second speedheal session to finish treating his fractured shoulder. All of which, it now seemed, would have put him at ground zero when the whole of med-bay went up in flames.

As it was, he had just emerged from the elevator and was walking down the corridor toward med-bay when the explosion ripped it apart and threw him off his feet. Whitby stood up slowly and inspected himself for damage.

Much to his surprise, he found he was none the worse for wear. Either somebody up there was looking out for him, or he was the luckiest drokker alive.

Stop standing around like some dumb drokking rubbernecker, he told himself. People are dying in there. You're a Judge, get moving. It's your duty to try and save them!

The sliding doors of med-bay had been blown away from their runners and smoke poured from inside into the corridor. Moving closer, Whitby felt a stifling wave of heat from the fires still burning inside. There must be oxygen tanks, surgical alcohol and other inflammables in there, he thought. The entire place is a powder keg. It could blow again at any time. For a moment Whitby stood uncertainly where he was. He thought of the victims who could still be alive inside, unconscious or too injured to move, helpless to escape the fire. He made a decision. Pulling down his helmet respirator and grabbing a fire extinguisher from among the debris lying on the floor, he steeled himself and moved forward into the heat, the smoke blinding as it closed around him like a shroud.

That's it, he thought as he stumbled onwards through the smoke. If I survive this, the first thing I'm doing is buying myself a Megalot ticket.

If I get out of this mess alive, you've got to figure I'm on such a lucky streak I might just end up winning the Billion Cred Bonanza.

A conspiracy of rogue Judges, a Sov-Block plot, mass hysteria, some kind of pre-emptive strike by an unknown crime group; as Judge Hass hurried up the emergency stairwell towards the Sector Command offices on the twentieth floor of the Sector House, he found his mind filled with a mass of conflicting theories to explain the bedlam that had erupted all around him. Chaos reigned in Sector House 12. First, the lights had gone out, then, Judges everywhere had turned on each other in a sudden mad orgy of bloodletting. Men and women who had served side-by-side together on the mean streets of the Big Meg for years had abruptly been overcome by a strange communal psychosis, raving about sin and damnation as they attacked former friends and comrades with Lawgivers, daysticks, boot knives and even their bare hands.

Hearing the distant sounds of shots and screams, Hass emerged from his office to investigate the source of the disturbance, only to find himself the victim of an attempted murderous assault by a Street Judge. Forced to shoot

the man and at first unsure whether the cabal of rogue Judges he suspected to be at work in Sector 12 had decided to move against him, Hass had looked about him and seen a scene from hell. He saw a Street Judge screaming on the ground, hands raised weakly to ward off the blows from the daysticks of two fellow Judges, while beside them a handcuffed perp stamped repeatedly at the fallen Judge's torso.

Another Judge lay dead nearby, while the man who had apparently killed him scrawled the word *Judged* on the wall beside him in the victim's blood. He saw a gang of civilian auxiliaries hold a Judge down while a crazed Tek-Judge tore the helmet from the man's head and took his boot knife to his face. It was the same all across the Sector House. The normal divisions between Judge and perp, perp and citizen, citizen and Judge had been wiped away. Instead, the Sector House seemed divided into two separate camps: those who were affected by the psychosis and those who were not. As far as Hass could see, the unaffected Judges were in the majority, but it made little difference. Caught by surprise at the ferocity of their insane colleagues' unexpected descent into violence, the sane Judges were in danger of being overwhelmed.

I have to get to the comm terminal, Hass thought, his breathing laboured as he stumbled up another flight of stairs. Finding the elevators out of order, he climbed nineteen storeys via the emergency stairwell, exhausted. I have to call this in to SJS and tell them the entire Sector House has gone crazy. They'll send reinforcements.

He had already tried to contact SJS via his helmet radio and the comm-link on his own desk, to no avail. Finding every channel full of empty static, Hass realised that something must have knocked out the comms-array and broadcast relays on top of the Sector House roof. He headed towards the twentieth floor and Sector Chief Franklin's office to try to use the comm terminal there - by virtue of his position, Franklin's terminal was equipped with a hard line direct to Justice Department in case of emergencies.

It had not been an easy journey. Not only had Hass been forced to face the exhausting climb up twenty flights of stairs, but he had been attacked twice on the way - once by a shrieking Judge-auxiliary who had attempted to decapitate him with a fire-axe, and once by a screaming Acc-Judge from Accounts Division who had tried to club him to death with a swivel-chair. Abruptly, Hass found himself feeling a twinge of guilt at the fact that he had been forced to kill them both, but they'd left him no choice.

Whatever insanity had descended on the Sector House, it turned its victims into glassy-eyed madmen consumed by a homicidal rage against those they saw as sinners. There was no reasoning with them. It had been a matter of survival which had left him with no other option than to kill them or be killed himself. It was a tragedy, but once order had been restored to the Sector House, he was sure his superiors at SJS would concur that they had been righteous shootings. Granted, procedure said he should have called out a warning to them to surrender before he fired, but in the heat of the moment there had been no time for such niceties. Anyway, they had all been crazy; it was not as though they would have listened. Hass had been forced to act in defence of his life. No matter what had happened after that, his conscience was not troubled.

Level twenty. Reaching the end of another flight of stairs, Hass saw the number stencilled in large letters on the wall beside the access door and breathed a sigh of relief. Finally, he had reached his destination.

Vernon Hass.

As he opened the door and stepped into the dark hallway, it seemed to Hass that he heard a voice whispering his name. The voice was low and quiet, barely audible. Tightening his grip on his Lawgiver as he advanced down the corridor, Hass moved the beam of his torch from side to side as he attempted to see whether anyone was hiding in the office doorways. Nothing. Shaking his head to clear it, he told himself he was hearing things. A stress reaction, no doubt; quite understandable given the ordeal he had been through in the last few minutes. Moving on, Hass advanced towards the sector chief's office. Finding Franklin's door ajar, he pushed it open and stepped cautiously inside.

Inside, he no longer needed the torch - the large window set into one side of the office wall meant the office was bathed in daylight from the sun outside. Then, Hass saw the body lying face-down on the floor behind the desk, blood seeping from a head wound to soak into the carpet. Hurrying towards the body and turning it over, Hass saw it was Franklin. The old man was dead, the bloody marks of what looked like a dozen different stab wounds gouged into his face and chest. Appalled, Hass glanced up from the body and noticed that the comm terminal on the Sector Chief's desk had been smashed to pieces. So much for his idea of calling Justice Department. Suddenly, looking back down at the body, Hass saw there was something clutched in Franklin's hand and realised the killer must have inadvertently

left evidence identifying himself behind. It was a Judge's badge - presumably pulled from the killer's uniform in the course of the struggle. As Hass levered open the dead man's fingers and revealed the name on the badge, he realised the murderous chaos engulfing in the Sector House was perhaps even worse than he thought.

The badge belonged to Deputy Sector Chief Grimes.

"We heard shots." Standing on the other side of the inner cage door that led into the Sector House Armoury, Quartermaster Judge Stein motioned to his men to open it. "And what sounded like an explosion. But with all the comms down, we had no way of finding out what was going on."

"The Sector House is under attack by terrorists," Deputy Sector Chief Grimes said. Waiting until the door was opened, he stepped swiftly inside the Armoury. "It's not entirely clear how many of them there are yet, but effective immediately I want the Armoury sealed and put on lockdown until the crisis is over."

"The power's out," Stein said. "Until it comes back on again, the electronic locks are out along with it." He nodded towards the Armoury's heavy plastisteel outer doors. "The only reason we were even able to let you in was because we already had the blast doors open to move some ordnance. If they had been shut when the power went out, we'd have been trapped in here. Anyway, even if the power comes back on again, I need a direct order from Chief Franklin before I can go to lockdown."

"Franklin's dead." Grimes's face was impassive. "I'm in command now."

"Dead?" Stein seemed shocked. "How?"

"Right now that's hardly the issue, Stein." Grimes's voice was stern, severe. "Have your men lock the cage door and barricade it. As of this moment, we are under siege - it is imperative the Armoury does not fall into enemy hands. And tell your men to be careful. Some of the terrorists are dressed as *Judges*."

"Yes, Deputy Chief."

Watching as Stein turned away to bark orders to his men, Grimes made a careful and surreptitious headcount of the total number of Judges inside the Armoury with him. Including Stein, Grimes counted six men in all - the usual complement for the time of day. For several minutes he watched their labours in silence as they began to stack crates of spare body armour, daysticks and other non-explosive equipment behind the cage door as a

makeshift barricade. Then, once he was satisfied that the barricade was sturdy enough for his purposes, he called to Stein and beckoned for the Quartermaster to come over and join him.

"I notice you and your men seem to be equipped with non-standard sidearms," Grimes said, nodding down towards the pistol in Stein's boot holster.

"It's a safety measure." From Stein's expression, it was clear he was surprised to hear Grimes focussing on such minutiae at a time of crisis. "When the men are on Armoury duty, we replace their Lawgiver Mark Twos with Berredas - semi-autos modified to fire plastic ammo designed to expand and remain within the target. It means if we have to discharge our weapons inside the Armoury there's less chance of a stray shot hitting munitions crates and setting off an explosion."

"I see," Grimes said. "In that case, let me see your weapon." When Stein seemed hesitant, he added, "There are an unknown number of hostiles inside the building, Stein. If we're going to be facing a fire fight, I want to be reassured you and your men's guns are up to the task."

"Actually, Deputy Chief, I was just about to order the men to break out the Lawgiver Mark Twos and Widowmakers." Complying with Grimes's instruction through the long habit of following orders, Stein pulled his gun from its holster and handed it to his superior grip-first. "As long as we can keep any attackers outside the Armoury, over-penetration shouldn't be a problem."

"Good thinking," Grimes said. Taking the proffered weapon and inspecting it, he noticed it lacked a self-destruct charge. He pointed the gun at Stein's face. "Oh, and Stein? That's twice you've called me 'Deputy Chief'. I told you, I'm the Sector Chief now."

He pulled the trigger, blood splatter hitting him as the bullet struck home. As Stein's body collapsed before him, Grimes turned the gun on the other Judges and cut them down before they could react. Then, as the last Judge fell to the floor, Grimes advanced over to them and began to kick the bodies to make sure they were dead. Coming to the last man, he heard a low groan.

"Why...?" The dying Judge whispered a faltering and despairing question.

"The man who controls the Armoury controls the Sector House," Grimes said as he squatted down beside him. "It's a truism they teach at the Academy, though I doubt any more than one in a hundred cadets ever really gives much thought to what it means. I knew I would face opposition once I

decided it was time to take up my rightful position as Sector Chief. Justice Department, the Council of Five, Chief Judge Hershey: I see now they are all against me. Especially Hershey. Bitch probably realised if she didn't destroy my career I'd end up taking her job off her one day - that's why she appointed that hatchet-faced dyke Meryl Coolidge to steal the position that should have been rightfully mine. It's a conspiracy, you see. Hershey, Franklin, Coolidge, Anderson, SJS Judge Hass: they are all in it together. Or, at least, Franklin *used* to be in it. He's not anymore. Not since I killed him."

Seeing the wounded Judge staring up at him in dumb incomprehension as though he thought he was crazy, Grimes sighed and pressed his pistol against the man's head.

"Never mind," he said, carefully extending the open palm of his left hand and placing it beside the barrel to make sure this time he would not be hit by any more spatter. "Let's just say I found myself forced to make a command decision. A Sector Chief needs to be decisive."

He pulled the trigger again, watching as the frightened look in the Judge's eyes gave way to blank emptiness as the bullet tore into his brain. Now he was Sector Chief, it seemed almost a shame to Grimes that he was forced to kill the men under his command. But he had to do it. He had known from the first that Stein and his men would be unlikely to support him. And anyway, they had all been *sinners*. Even now, Grimes was not quite certain how he knew that, but he was sure it was true all the same.

"They should have just made me Sector Chief years ago," he said to himself wistfully. "If they had only done that, none of this unpleasantness would have been necessary."

Standing, Grimes took one last glance at the bodies of the men lying around him. He felt a sudden sadness at what he had been forced to do. His reign as Sector Chief was barely fifteen minutes old, yet - including his predecessor, Franklin - he had been forced to kill seven men already. Shaking his head, he dismissed the emotion. As he turned to begin dragging the corpses of the dead Quartermaster Judges out of the way, it occurred to him, sometimes the old adages were true. You could not make an omelette without breaking open a packet of synthi-egg. Besides, to be a Sector Chief you needed to be strong. And really, there was no difference between having the inner strength to order men to their deaths and shooting them yourself.

Sometimes, killing people was what being in command was all about.

FIFTEEN

IN THE MIDST OF CRISIS

Souls. Screaming. Terrified. They flowed towards him from every part of the Sector House. Feeding him. Giving him sustenance. From his hiding place in the darkness Uriel could feel himself growing stronger as second by second, minute by minute, more souls came to him in shrieking, frightened waves. He felt his powers wax ever more broadly, escaping the narrow confines of the building around him to extend out into the wider city nearby, claiming the adjoining areas on the periphery of the Sector House block by block and street by street. He no longer needed to sit in the head of a single proxy. He had dozens, even hundreds of followers now - the number grew larger every minute - united to do his bidding in a crusade against sin.

Growing fat and bloated on stolen souls, Uriel's influence could now be felt across the entire sector. And with every act of retribution, every instant of judgement, every death, another soul was made ripe and ready for him. Each one of his followers, his agents, served as a collector. With every death of a sinner at the agent's hands, another soul was gathered. Then, when the agent himself died - whether through the action of other sinners defending themselves, or simply because Uriel had told the agent to end his own life - the soul of the agent and every other soul he had gathered came rushing toward Uriel in a surge of power. It was a virtuous cycle. He invaded minds and made men his puppets, then through the deaths of those puppets he accumulated the power to make yet more puppets to kill for him in their turn. And more, and more, and more.

One became two. Two became four. Four became eight. Death by death, body by body, soul by soul, his power grew geometrically. Deep inside him though, Uriel knew the cycle was not yet complete. No matter how many souls he feasted on, savouring the taste of human emotions as he snuffed out another life and annihilated every trace of its existence, the hunger inside him was not abated. It was not satisfied. He was still missing something. He needed more power. More lives. More souls. More. More. More. Anything to finally sate the hunger burning within him.

More. He needed more. He was a shadow in every mind - an invisible psychic presence, spreading out across Sector 12 and bending its citizens to his will. Still it was not enough.

He was hungry.

He needed more.

Then, abruptly, Uriel felt a sudden disquiet as he felt a distinctive psychic signature moving toward the centre of his power. He recognised it at once. It was the psi-bitch! She was a threat to him. All the more so while the cycle was yet to be completed. And, feeling her draw nearer, Uriel resolved to destroy her once and for all...

"Anderson to Central Control!" Bringing her bike to a halt on the forecourt outside the Sector House, Anderson pulled the radio unit from her belt and moved towards the building with her Lawgiver at the ready. As she advanced towards the Sector House she heard the occasional shot - some from inside the building, and some from the distance elsewhere in the sector. Pausing for a moment to gaze around her, she realised the streets in the immediate vicinity of the Sector House were deserted. In Mega-City One, that was the most unnatural thing of all. In a city of four hundred million people, the last thing you expected to see approaching midday was empty streets. It was unsettling. It was like the entire Sector had abruptly become a ghost town.

Maybe they all know something you don't, Cass, she thought to herself. Whatever's going on here, it's something bad. Could be you're the only person in the Sector without the common sense to get inside and stay out of the way.

"Central Control responding, Anderson." Given the eerie quiet of the streets around her, Anderson found it was a relief to hear Control calling to her over the airwaves. Pushing up the volume of her radio to better hear the controller's voice through the hiss of static, she noticed the sound of it seemed distant and indistinct as though the signal was having problems getting through. "We have your location as just arriving on the scene at the Sector House. Confirm?"

"That is confirmed, Control. Things look pretty grim. The area around the Sector House seems to be completely deserted, while looking at the Sector House itself I can see smoke from multiple fires burning on levels four, six, eleven, fifteen, and the comms-array on the roof of the building. Occasional gunshots, both from inside the building and outside at other unidentified locations across the sector. Also, whatever's going on, there's no sign of there having been any attempt to evacuate the Sector House. Looks like

everybody's still inside, which leads me to believe things must be pretty bad in there. Requesting medical support, fire fighters and further Judges as backup. Over."

"Acknowledged. Fire-teams and med-teams are already en route to your location, along with backup. Be advised though, their ETA currently stands at twenty minutes. Over."

"Twenty minutes?" Anderson was shocked. "Not wanting to be seen to be complaining for the hell of it, Control, but you realise there are people *dying* here? Request you contact the responding units at once and tell them to get a skedding move on."

"No can do, Anderson." It was hard to be certain through the static, but it sounded like the controller was as frustrated at the situation as she was. "The assigned units are already responding to incidents elsewhere in the sector. We have reports of multiple homicides, riots, assaults, arson attacks, futsies on the rampage - you wouldn't believe the shitstorm that's blown up in Sector 12 over the last few minutes. It's like the whole sector's going to hell on a handcart. The Central Regional Commander has been on the line with the Chief Judge, requesting extra units be seconded from other sectors so he can send tac-teams in via H-Wagon to try and restore order. So far it's no go on that score though. There's been a mass break-in of mutants from the Cursed Earth on the West Wall earlier this morning, and right now all available units are being used to contain it."

"Great," Anderson said. "So basically, what you're telling me is I'm on my own for the foreseeable fut-"

Suddenly, as she drew closer to the building, it hit her. Darkness, pouring out through every window, door and crack of the Sector House in great black waves. Spreading towards her. Engulfing her. Soon, it was just like it had been when the futsie Jeffrey Queeg had died. Anderson found herself blinded, surrounded by darkness on every side. And, in the darkness, she heard a voice whispering to her.

Cassandra Anderson. The sound was louder now, as though the creature making it had grown larger since last they had met.

Cassandra Anderson. A strange voice, malign and knowing.

Cassandra Anderson. A whisper in the darkness. It was compelling.

It is time to be...

Fighting back hard, she resisted. She raised her defences, felt the entity throw itself repeatedly at the psychic barrier she had erected around her as it

tried to break through. The wall held. She kept it at bay. She heard its voice on the other side, screaming in impotent rage and frustration as it found she was a match for it. Screaming even more loudly now, its voice became an incomprehensible screech.

You think I'm scared of you? She sharpened the thought and sent it across the barrier at the entity with the force of a knife. *You think you're the big bad wolf and you've only got to huff and puff and you'll blow my house down? You think I don't know what's really going on here? You think I don't know that it's you who's really scared? We both know it's only a matter of time before I find out exactly what you are and where you're hiding. And when I do, you're afraid I'm going to take you apart and put you back under whatever slimy rock you first crawled out from underneath of. That's it, isn't it? You're scared of me.*

Feeling the entity throw itself against the barrier again without effect, she let the thought hang in the air a moment. Then, she twisted the knife.

And you know what? I got news for you. You're right. My name's Cass Anderson. I'm a Psi-Judge. You think you're scary? I'm your worst drokking nightmare.

"Anderson?"

With a final shriek of rage, the darkness receded. Finding herself standing outside the Sector House once more, she heard the voice of Central Control calling over her radio in concern.

"Anderson?"

"Anderson receiving."

"What the drokk happened? You suddenly stopped talking in mid-sentence. Then, when I kept calling you, there was no reply. For a second there, I thought somebody must've killed you."

"Nothing as dramatic as that, Control. I had to deal with a sudden eclipse, that's all."

"Eclipse? What in the name of Grud's ass are you talking about? We've had no reports of an eclip-"

"Never mind. It'd take too long to explain." Gazing towards the Sector House, she gathered herself for a moment. Then, ready now to face whatever she would find there, Anderson began to walk purposefully towards the building's front entrance. She was going in. "I want you to get on the line to Psi Division Headquarters and tell them Sector House 12 is

currently in the possession of a hostile psychic entity. Tell them I'm issuing a Priority One-Alpha request for Psi Division backup.

"Tell them I want a team of Exorcists down here. And I want them *now*."

Inside, it was every bit as bad as the scene that had greeted her on the thirty-eighth floor of Charles Whitman Block. Given that the automatic doors at the Sector House's front entrance had opened for her, it was readily apparent that the power cut had ended. With the lights on though, it simply meant she could see the bodies lying around the waiting area in front of the check-in desk all the more clearly. There were bodies everywhere: Judges, citizens, auxiliaries, all dead. She saw bullet holes, stab wounds, contusions, people who had obviously been strangled. Worst of all was the chilling similarity she found among some of the corpses before her and the corpses at the Whitman crime scene.

Some of the bodies are blank and soulless, Anderson thought, her psychic senses instinctively reaching out to the dead all around her. Empty shells, like the entity has sucked out their souls already. But I can still sense pain, fear, horror - as though the souls of some of the other victims escaped being consumed. But how? Why?

Trying to reconstruct what had happened from the evidence strewn all about her, Anderson noticed that the plasteen seating in the waiting area had been pulled up from its moorings - evidently to be used as clubs and missiles. There was probably a riot among the citizens, she decided. Then, the check-in Judges must have intervened to try and subdue the rioters. With so many different kinds of wounds here, there must have been at least half-a-dozen killers. But what happened to them? And how come the Judges weren't able to stop them?

Questions. Again, frustratingly, it was just like Whitman. There were murder victims lying on the floor around her in heaps and piles, and all she had was more questions in need of answers.

Bodies in heaps and piles, she thought, a tingling at the back of her scalp. Just like Whitman.

Just like Whitman...

The perp's using them for cover!

She heard a sound behind her, but Anderson was already dodging out of the way. Shots were fired and she saw a figure rising swiftly from among the corpses through the corner of her eye. Anderson returned fire, three

shots, a triple tap, hitting her would-be assailant in a tight group in the centre of his chest. Catching clear sight of him at last, Anderson saw something that horrified her.

She had just shot a Judge.

"Sinner." The Judge looked at her, his eyes glazing over, his Lawgiver falling from nerveless fingers as he slid towards the ground. "You're a sinner. You must be judged..."

He hit the ground, dead. Appalled, Anderson looked down at him in disbelief. She had killed a Judge. As the remains of his life left his body, she heard the Judge give out a last despairing psychic scream. The sound seemed to act as a kind of summoning. She heard a shrill sound like a rush of air moving past her, recognising it as the screams of a dozen terrified human souls as they were sucked to oblivion. It was the same as when the futsie Jeffrey Queeg had died. Briefly, Anderson found herself standing on the edge of a psychic maelstrom centred on the dead Judge's body, as wailing souls were pulled inward to feed the unspeakable appetites of the entity that held Sector House 12 in its thrall. Just as quickly, it was over. The screams died away. In the aftermath, there was only silence.

Judges, Anderson thought. The entity's using Judges now to do his dirty work and each time one of the killers dies, the entity absorbs the souls of all the killer's victims.

She moved around the waiting area, opening her mind to the Psi-flux, and found her fears were confirmed. All the bodies read as blank. With the death of the Judge, the entity had consumed the remaining souls in the waiting area. At last Anderson had the answers to her earlier questions.

Given what had had to happen for her to learn them, it seemed a hollow victory.

Check-In. The Roll Call and Briefing Rooms. The Central Assignment Desk. Area by area, room by room, Anderson moved through the ominously quiet stillness of Sector House 12 and found the same scene of horror greeting her at every turn. Bodies lying across floors, slumped against walls, fallen beside desks and chairs. Judges, perps, auxiliaries, citizens: the carnage that had engulfed the Sector House seemed to encompass every division and rank of humanity inside it. Anderson found dead Tek-Judges, Street Judges, station Judges. There were dead perps in handcuffs, citizens and auxiliaries shot to death, beaten, stabbed, strangled, mutilated, even

beheaded. The dead were all around her, their psychic signatures gone, their bodies blank and empty. Here and there, she found corpses whose lingering psychic traces had not yet been annihilated, as though their killers were at large somewhere, the souls they had gathered still waiting to be collected. But they were in the minority. By now she realised the entity might well have absorbed hundreds of souls, growing stronger with each one.

Keep it sharp and tight, Cass, she told herself as she rounded another corner and saw a fresh scene of slaughter in the foyer leading to the Sector House's elevators. You've worked enough crimes scenes in the past, and Grud knows, you've seen plenty of bodies. Sharp and tight. The words had almost become a mantra. Sharp and tight. You've got to stay focussed if you're going to find a way to stop this.

By her best reckoning she had been in the Sector House for at least half-an-hour. So far the only other living beings she had seen in that time were two maniacal Judges who had tried to kill her. Having learned that killing them would give the entity more victims and thus more strength, she had used the Stun-Shot Energy Pulse on her Lawgiver to knock them unconscious, then chained them to holding posts with their own handcuffs while they were still stunned. Maybe if I can keep it from feeding I can starve the thing to death, she thought, but she dismissed the idea. Considering how many dead she had seen already in the Sector House, Grud only knew how long the entity could keep on going with that much stolen power.

"Hey! Over here, I could do with some help."

The man's voice came from a pile of bodies lying next to a nearby wall. Anderson moved cautiously towards it. Carefully, her finger on the trigger of her Lawgiver, she put her foot underneath the uppermost body and shifted it to one side. Buried beneath the corpses she saw the face of a Tek-Judge blinking nervously back at her, his hand incongruously caught inside an access panel in the wall beside him.

"Thank Grud," the Tek-Judge said. He was thin and looked to be in his thirties. "I was beginning to think I was never going to get out of this. I'm Symonds, from Tek-Bay Two. Hey, you're the Psi-Judge, aren't you? Anderson, right?"

"Uh-huh." Half-expecting him to attack her at any second, she kept her Lawgiver trained on him. "Before we go any further with the introductions,

you got anything in particular you want to tell me? Like you've been hearing voices talking to you about sin and damnation?"

"Uh... No." For a moment he looked at her in confusion, then his expression grew frightened as he tried to squirm away from her. "Oh, sweet Grud! You're one of them. Another psycho."

"Relax, Symonds." Her own fears allayed, she holstered her Lawgiver and shifted the rest of the bodies away from him. "You want to tell me how come you're lying here like a kid with his hand caught in the cookie jar?"

"Oh, that." Reassured she wasn't about to kill him, Symonds breathed a sigh of relief. "I was checking the power conduits, trying to track down what's been causing all these power cuts. Then, from out of nowhere, things went nuts and everybody started trying to kill each other. Three Judges got shot right next to me and the only reason I wasn't hit was because I was already on my knees." Seeming suddenly embarrassed by the admission, he tried to explain himself hurriedly. "Because of the power conduits, I mean. They always put the access panels for these things way too low on the walls so you've got to get right down there if you want to see inside them. I've written memos about it to the Chief Tek, but he says-"

"You were telling me about the shooting, Symonds." Moving to pull the last of the bodies away, she noticed the dead man had fallen against the access panel, the weight of his body forcing the panel shut on Symonds's hand. "Wait a minute, let me guess. You were kneeling down when the shooting started, then you were caught under the three dead Judges when they fell on top of you and you couldn't get up. You couldn't free yourself or reach your Lawgiver, so you decided to play dead until the cavalry arrived."

"Wow!" He looked at her in amazement. "How did you know all that?"

"I'm psychic. Go figure." She sighed. Great, here was the first person she had run into in the last half-hour who wasn't dead or trying to kill her, and he seemed to be an idiot. She noticed Symonds gingerly rubbing at his wrist now that his hand was released from the grip of the access panel. "You still able to shoot?"

"Uh... Yeah, sure." Checking his Lawgiver was still in his boot holster, Symonds stood up. "There's still more crazies running about then?" He turned his head and scanned their surroundings in apprehension. "I keep hearing shots."

"You will until we can get things under control here. They're supposed to be sending backup to us from other sectors, but so far there's no sign of

them. Can't check on their ETA either because my radio's been out ever since I came into the Sector House."

"Yeah, it would be." Symonds's expression was matter-of-fact. "I'm guessing it was working okay so long as you were near your Lawmaster, right? You see, the range on these handheld units is pretty limited, same as with helmet radios, so they're designed to patch into the nearest available relay to boost their signal. When you came into the Sector House, your radio would've automatically switched from using the GS 4T on your bike to trying to use the comms-array on the roof, and the comms-array is out, so no signal. If you let me have the unit a minute, I'll see what I can do."

"You can fix it?" This time it was Anderson's turn to be vaguely amazed.

"Sure," Symonds said, taking the radio unit from her as she handed it towards him. "I just have to disable the switching chip here..." Pulling the back of the unit open, he put his fingers inside and made an adjustment. "There. As long as you stay in range of your Lawmaster and don't go underground, you'll find your radio should work all right." Closing it, he handed the radio back to her before looking over her shoulder. "Hey, look. Somebody's using the elevators."

The numbers on the digital display above one of the elevators was counting down floor by floor as the elevator came closer. Sprinting towards it, Anderson hit the elevator button to make sure it would stop at their floor, then retreated to a safe distance to face it with her Lawgiver.

"Get ready," she said, realising Symonds was still standing dumbly in the same location. "Safeties off. There's no way of knowing whether they're going to be friendlies or hostiles."

"Hostiles?" As the floor display continued counting down, Symonds jogged over and drew his Lawgiver as he crouched beside her. "You think the psychos know how to use elevators?"

"They use guns, don't they?" she said tersely. "They're psychos, Symonds, not zombies. The only difference between them and us is that they're under the entity's psychic influence-"

"Entity?" Symonds seemed alarmed. "What entity? I thought we were just dealing with crazy people?"

"It's a long story," she said as the *ping* of the elevator announced it had reached their floor. "Ask me later. Right now, we've got other things to worry about."

The doors opened, but instead of frothing madmen they found themselves face-to-face with a group of Judges, some of whom were injured. She recognised a familiar face among the crowd.

"Anderson, am I glad to see you!"

It was Whitby. Excited to see her, he strode from the elevator towards her, then he stopped, his expression wary.

"You needn't worry," she said, guessing at the origin of the glint of suspicion in his eyes. "Neither me nor Symonds here are about to go psycho and start shouting about sin and judgement." She saw his uniform was singed and stained with soot, a torn sleeve revealing a small but ugly burn on his forearm. "Looks like you've been in the wars."

"There was a fire in med-bay," he shrugged. "I got as many out as I could..." His voice trailed away.

"What about these others?" Gazing at the rag-tag selection of Judges emerging from the elevator, she saw there were about a dozen of them who were still able-bodied. They ran the gamut of Sector House life: Street Judges, Tek-Judges, station Judges, even an owlish Acc-Judge from Accounting.

"Before the power came back on I was to trying to evac the wounded by the emergency stairwell," Whitby told her. "We came across more survivors along the way, not to mention more than a few crazies."

"Yeah, I've met a few myself," she said. "Okay. You've seen more of the Sector House than I have. How bad is it?"

"Bad." Whitby's expression grew dark. "Most of the Sector House staff are dead. Entire floors have been gutted by fire before the sprinklers came on, and then there's the crazies. Whatever happened seemed to affect the auxiliaries and citizens worse than it did the Judges. From what I've seen maybe only one Judge in five was affected, but that's enough when we're talking about psychos wearing body armour and armed with Lawgivers." He tilted his head to indicate the carnage of the foyer around them. "Every floor above us is as bad as this one. The whole Sector House has been turned into a slaughterhouse, and without Judges on the streets, Grud knows what's happening in the rest of the sector. Perps are probably having a field day."

"It's worse than that," she said. "Last time I talked to Justice Department, there were reports of futsies and riots all across the sector. I think all the

souls the entity's absorbed have allowed it to expand its influence to the wider sector - doing the same things outside as it's done here."

"The entity?" Whitby said. It was the same question Symonds had asked. Glancing about her, Anderson realised they had an audience - all the Judges had gathered around to listen.

"Some kind of psychic entity has possessed the Sector House," she said. "Don't ask me what kind of creature it is; I only wish I knew. It takes control of people's minds, sends them out on a killing spree, then feeds on the souls of their victims."

"Drokk," Whitby said quietly. "What about us? How come we haven't been affected?"

"Could be we're more strong-willed than the others," she said. "You said only a minority of Judges had been affected. It could be that's the answer - after surviving fifteen years at the Academy, you'd expect a Judge to have more willpower than the average citizen. Then again, I'm only guessing." She shrugged. "Not wanting to dent your faith in me, Whitby, but when it comes to this thing, I'm as much in the dark as the rest of you."

There was a pause as the assembled Judges digested what she had told them.

"Still, you're Psi Division, Anderson," Whitby said at last. She noticed the others seemed to defer to him, as though in the course of their journey through the Sector House they had accepted him as their leader. "You know a hell of lot more about handling situations like this than we do. What's our next move?"

Looking at the Judges, she saw there were at least three seriously wounded cases among the injured. "First we evac the wounded to the waiting area outside Check-In - that way the walking wounded can guard the badly injured, while they'll all be in the best possible place to get immediate treatment whenever the med-teams finally arrive. After that, I say we take our Sector House back. The entity may have expanded its influence to the rest of the sector, but Sector House 12 is still the epicentre of this whole mess. This is where the battle will be fought and this is where we'll beat it."

"Sounds like a plan to me," Whitby agreed. The uncertainty she had seen in him in the Undercity and after Brophy's psychotic breakdown had gone. He seemed more forthright, a man who had found his inner steel in the wake of the crisis unfolding around him.

"There's a complication," she said. "I know it'll be dangerous, but when it comes to subduing the people under the entity's influence, we have to try to do it without killing them."

"You're kidding right? Grud, Anderson. I know some of them are Judges, but don't you think things have gone kind of far to be worrying about the niceties?"

"Niceties don't come into it." She shook her head. "Every time we're forced to kill someone who's gone psycho, the entity feeds on their soul. The people doing the killing may be crazy, but they're as much the victims as anybody else. Listen, you'll just have to trust me, this is one of those times when by winning the battle, we may lose the war, and I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't intend on losing anything here today."

There was more silence, but looking at the faces around her, she could see she had convinced them. They might not like the implications, but they would go along with her.

"All right," she said. "Once we've evac'd the wounded, we need to get to the Armoury to pick up some equipment. We'll need riot foam, stumm gas, riot guns, shockprods - anything that can help us take down the crazies without killing them." She noticed Whitby looking at her strangely. "What is it?"

"Yeah, about that. We passed by the Armoury on our way down here." He paused, shifting uneasily. "I think we might have a problem with Deputy Chief Grimes."

SIXTEEN

SUPPLY CHAIN IRREGULARITIES

"Deputy Chief Grimes!" From his position crouched behind the barricade inside the Armoury, Grimes heard the voice of the Tek-Judge calling to him from the other end of the corridor. The man's face was familiar, but he couldn't put a name to it. "This isn't right. Think what you're doing here. You have to listen to reason."

"No," Grimes yelled as he stood up, firing a burst from the spit gun and watching with cold satisfaction as the Tek-Judge ducked to safety around the corner. "You listen. How many times do I have to tell you I'm Sector Chief Grimes? Sector Chief. I'm not telling you again."

That told him, he thought, crouching back down. What is it with everyone around here? You tell them you're sector chief and they simply refuse to listen. Then, you shoot a few of them to make the point and before you know it the others are treating you like you're crazy. Crazy! The very idea. Would a crazy man have realised the best way to control a Sector House is by controlling the Armoury? I think not.

"Please, Sector Chief Grimes," the Tek-Judge called. Abruptly, the name that had been on the tip of Grimes's tongue came to him at last. Symonds. That was the Tek-Judge's name. "There has to be some way to resolve this peacefully. Surely we can negotiate-"

"Negotiate this," Grimes roared back, firing another burst as Symonds scurried back under cover.

At least he called me sector chief this time, Grimes thought. Not that I'm fooled, mind you. They're just humouring me, trying to trick me into a false sense of security. Yes, that's it, they're all part of the conspiracy, every single one of them. They all want to steal my sperm.

It had come to him in a flash of inspiration a short while ago - the answer to a question that had been troubling him. For the longest time he had wondered - given that he was in control of the Armoury and therefore the Sector House - how it was that every Judge he met refused to call him sector chief or salute him. It had been unsettling, until at last he had seen the reason. The conspiracy led by Chief Judge Hershey, Meryl Coolidge and Anderson had obviously got to them first. But even that answer begged other questions: why were they trying to destroy him? What did these three

women have in common that caused them to hate him? Finally he had seen it. Three women, fighting their way to positions of power in a world dominated by men. In the end, the answer had been as plain as the nose on his face.

Obviously, they were all lesbians.

That was why they hated him. Here he was, a strong and virile man, born to command and clearly destined to rise far in Justice Department. It was obvious they resented his virility and they were intimidated by the one thing he had that their sad and tragically man-free lives lacked. It made perfect sense. Like the story of Samson and Delilah, they wanted to rob him of the source of his strength.

They wanted his sperm.

At the other end of the corridor, the Tek-Judge was quiet. No more calling out or pleading for him to "reasonable". He's probably on the radio, Grimes thought, firing another burst of bullets down the corridor, just to be on the safe side. Taking instructions from his lesbian superiors, no doubt. Trying to come up with a new way to trick me. Not that it'll work, of course. But, Grud knows, you've got to wonder what this world is coming to. I knew things were bad, but all this just takes the cake.

I mean, what kind of world is it when a man has to fight to the death to stop lesbians from stealing his sperm?

Drokk, but it's cramped in here, Whitby thought, nearly banging his head again for the third time in as many minutes. Good thing I'm not claustrophobic. If I were, I'd probably be having a screaming fit right about now.

He was in one of the Sector House's ventilation ducts, crawling on his hands and knees through the darkness after Anderson as they made their way towards the Armoury. Once he had explained to her that Deputy Chief Grimes was holed up in the Armoury and was shooting at anybody who came close, Anderson quickly came up with a plan. While Symonds and some of the other Judges tried to distract Grimes's attention, the two of them would crawl through the ventilation ducts in the hope of taking the insane deputy chief by surprise. As plans went, it had seemed a pretty good one at the time, but now, having spent fifteen minutes breathing stale air with the walls of the duct tight around his shoulders, Whitby had begun to wish he hadn't volunteered for the job. It was not so much that he was

risking getting shot, or even the fact he could occasionally hear rats moving through the ducts nearby. No, the origins of his misgivings were much more practical: after fifteen minutes of cramp and discomfort it was abundantly clear to him now that crawling through ducts was definitely a job for a smaller man.

Nearly there, he heard Anderson's voice talking in his mind. All the way along the ducts, in order to make as little noise as possible, she had been communicating with him telepathically. It took some getting used to - every time he suddenly heard her voice in her mind, Whitby nearly jumped out of his skin.

Ahead, he saw a glimmer of light and heard sporadic gunshots. The sound of Symonds's voice shouting something and the sound of Deputy Chief Grimes yelling back about being sector chief now. More gunshots. Drokker's gone totally futsie, Whitby thought. Grimes always did seem tightly wound. Guess whatever this entity had to do to make him go crazy, it didn't have to push too hard.

Here it is, he heard Anderson's voice in his mind say. They had reached their destination - a ventilation grill that opened out from the duct to the ceiling of the Armoury. As he stayed on one side of it with his fingers through the grill to hold it, Anderson produced the omni-tool Symonds had given her earlier and started to unfasten the screws keeping the grill in place. Symonds had bragged that he had modified the motor of his omni-tool to run more quietly, but these were nervous moments all the same. If Grimes heard them at the grill, the two of them would be sitting ducks.

That's the last one, Anderson said telepathically, helping him turn the now un-attached grill sideways to pull it inside the duct with them. *Careful now*. *We go in quietly and split up. You take the left, I'll take the right, and remember we don't want to kill him.*

-Lowering herself through the grill, Anderson dropped soundlessly into the Armoury. Following her, inwardly cringing at the soft *thump* as his boot soles hit the floor, Whitby saw they had landed in one of the aisles between the endless shelves and supply stacks that took up the majority of the Armoury's space. It was ominously quiet. Feeling exposed, Whitby quickly moved so his back was against one of the shelves. As Anderson headed off in the other direction, he made his way stealthily through the aisles in search of Grimes. The Armoury was a maze of aisles, the shelves and stacks around him piled high with all manner of equipment, and he soon lost sight

of Anderson. Torches, rad-cloaks, spare utility belts, helmets, binoculars: boxes and crates of many different shapes and sizes, all marked as to their contents. But there was no sign of Grimes.

Whitby, he heard Anderson's voice in his head again, the tone calm yet urgent. *I could do with some help back here*.

Retracing his steps, moving swiftly back the way he'd come, Whitby hurried quietly along the aisles to find her. Ahead, somewhere through the intervening stacks, he heard a distant voice talking. He recognised it at once: it was Grimes!

"You think I'm a fool?" he heard Grimes say. "You think I didn't know you were coming for me? You think my friend the voice didn't tell me you were coming?"

"The voice?" Anderson replied. Hurrying even more quickly through the aisles, Whitby tried to home in on the sound. "Listen to me, Grimes, whatever you think, that voice in your head isn't a friend."

"He told me you'd say that," Grimes said. It seemed to Whitby he was closer. He was getting warmer. "He told me the psi-bitch would try to trick me. Psi-bitch. That's what he calls you. He tells me a lot of things. About what a sin it is that I was passed over for promotion and how I should do something about it. Good advice, all of it. Of course, he didn't tell me about the lesbian conspiracy. That I had to work out for myself."

Closer. It sounded like they were in the next aisle.

There. Rounding the corner, Whitby saw them. Anderson with her Lawgiver at her feet and her hands up in the air, Grimes standing beside her with a pistol pressed against her temple. *He must have been waiting for her*, Whitby thought. *Grud, he could pull the trigger at any moment!*

Lifting his gun, for an instant Whitby hesitated. They taught at the academy that the only sure shot is a head shot, but Anderson said she wanted Grimes alive. He had no choice. Even if he shot for the hand or elbow, Grimes still might be able to get off a round. A head shot, right at brainstem. It was his only choice.

"Lesbians?" Anderson played for time. "Right. Of course. Why don't you tell me all about it?"

"Don't do that." There was a dangerous edge to Grimes's words, a rising tone of anger. "Don't try to humour me like you don't know what I'm talking about. You know all about it, Anderson. You think I don't know you're one of them?"

Looking through his Lawgiver's viewfinder, Whitby noticed there was a crate of street rations behind Grimes's head. Good, he thought. That way, if the bullet over-penetrated it wouldn't end up hitting munitions and starting a chain reaction. You're thinking too much, he told himself as he locked on target. Concentrate, like you were back on the firing range at the Academy. There's just you and the target. Nothing else.

Take the shot, he heard Anderson's voice in his head. He saw Grimes's finger tighten on the trigger.

"You think I don't know what you're doing here?" Grimes's voice had risen to a shriek. "You think I don't know you're trying to steal my sperm?"

"No offence, Grimes," Anderson said calmly, "but I wouldn't take it if you were giving it away."

Whitby fired a single shot, hitting Grimes just below the cheekbone and exiting bloodily through the back of his head. Features slackening, gun falling from useless fingers, Grimes slid limply towards the ground.

"Anderson?" Whitby ran over to her. She was standing over Grimes's body, looking down at him with an expression of quiet horror as though she was watching something no one else could see. "Anderson? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said after a moment. She seemed distracted. "The entity... It got him, sucked away his soul and the souls of everyone he killed. So much darkness..." She shook her head and turned to him. "Nice shot, by the way, Whitby. Next time I've got a crazy standing with a gun against my head, I'll know who to call for a rescue."

"I had to kill him," Whitby said.

"You'll get no arguments from me on that score," Anderson said. "Thanks, Whitby. You saved my life."

They were silent for a moment, then she gathered her thoughts. Anderson retrieved Grimes's gun.

"Plastic ammo," she said, extracting the magazine and inspecting the contents. "Sounded like Grimes was firing at the others with a spit gun earlier, but when it came to a fire fight inside the Armoury, it looks like he wasn't crazy enough to start shooting off a Lawgiver."

"You think it means something? I mean, either way, he was crazy."

"Yeah, he was at that." She shrugged. "Think about it, though. It's obvious enough the entity wants us all dead, but seeing as it was controlling Grimes, why didn't it just get him to shoot a hi-ex into the ammunition

stacks and blow us all to kingdom come? Instead, Grimes did the opposite - taking care *not* to blow the Armoury up. Is it just me, or does that seem pretty rational behaviour for a psycho? Kind of makes you wonder if there's some reason the entity has for not wanting to see the Sector House destroyed."

She shook her head, then nodded to the crates full of weapons and equipment.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe it's nothing. Right now, we got more important things to do than worry about it. Go get Symonds and the others and tell them it's safe to come out. It's time to arm up. We got a Sector House that's under the control of a hostile psychic entity. *Our* Sector House, and I don't know about you, but I'd say it's about time we took it back."

SEVENTEEN

TAKING IT BACK

Souls. Screaming souls. From all across the sector they flowed to him in their thousands. Hidden in the dark places of Sector House 12, Uriel felt great surges of energy run through him as he absorbed the essences of victim after victim. He was engorged, empowered. So many souls, that for a moment his hunger was silenced. The raging void within him stood on the verge of fulfilment. He was approaching satiation, and with it the next phase drew closer. Soon the cycle would be completed. He felt strange stirrings within his body. Inside him a dozen points of shadow coalesced within his flesh and began to grow larger. Soon. He was nearing completion. Soon, he sensed, he would begin a new transformation.

But even with triumph beckoning, Uriel was not content. Something troubled him: a thought, worrying him like an insect gnawing at the flesh of some great beast. A danger. An impediment. A frustration.

The psi-bitch.

At the thought of her he felt a flush of anger. She was a threat to him, a rock in his path. Alone of the teeming minds around him, she had the power to undo his work and forestall his great design. Time after time he had attempted to kill her and time after time he had been thwarted. Now things would be different. This time, finally, he would destroy her.

He stretched out his limbs to the wider sector, feeling ten thousand puppets jerk their heads towards him as he pulled their strings tight. From the darkness he called out to them, his voice a whisper in ten thousand minds, ten thousand blood-stained disciples, an army of killers who lived only to do his bidding.

He called to them. Out through the streets and intervening buildings, he sent a message. Across the sector, in housing blocks and con-apts and rooming houses, ten thousand killers paused in the midst of murder and made their way down to the streets. They gathered in the open spaces, in the plazas and precincts, waiting patiently while the whispering voice inside them relayed new instructions. At last, their orders received, they turned en masse toward the centre of the sector and made their way toward Sector House 12. A slave army marched inexorably to the rhythm of his will, a

hive-mind, driven by a single imperative. Ten thousand killers pushed onward by a simple and clear command: the psi-bitch must die!

"Symonds, this is Maddicks on level five. We've got two more crazies in custody - that seems to be the last of them on this floor. Reporting level five as swept and clear. Over."

"Symonds, this is Tierney. We have reached Custody Command on basement sub-level two. There's been one hell of a bloodbath down here. The whole place is full of corpses. Looks like the prisoners and warders tried to kill each other, then the survivors killed themselves. Reporting basement sub-level two as swept and clear. Over."

"Symonds, this is Gottlieb on level fourteen. No survivors here. One crazy in custody. Reporting level fourteen as swept and clear. Over."

From the crackle of comms-traffic over her radio, it sounded like they were making progress. Anderson was on level eight, taking it one room at a time, searching for survivors and crazies while, on the other floors of the Sector House, her fellow Judges went through the same procedure. She had left Symonds back at ground level, tasked with the job of handling comms between Anderson and the others as they cleared the Sector House floor by floor. Despite her initial misgivings, Symonds had turned out to be quite an asset. First he had restored communications by adjusting their radios to route their signals through the comms unit on Anderson's bike parked outside. Now he was running the resulting comms-traffic with such calm efficiency it was as if he had been doing it for years.

"Symonds, this is Jurgens in the Landing Bay on level fifteen. The entire place has been gutted by fire, although it looks like the sprinklers stopped it from spreading. All H-Wagons here are non-operational. Reporting Landing Bay as swept and clear. Over."

"Roger that, Jurgens," she heard Symonds's voice over the radio. "Request you rendezvous with Judge Gottlieb on stairwell and clear level sixteen. Symonds out."

"Symonds, this is Schreiber. We've got two survivors in the Judge's barracks on level fifteen. Get some medical attention up here ASAP."

"Roger that, Schreiber. I'm sending Acc-Judge Thorley up to you with a medi-pack. I know it's not much, but it's the best I can do."

"Symonds, this is Anderson on level eight. You heard anything more from Central Control about med-teams and backup? Seems like their idea of

twenty minutes is a hell of a lot longer than ours."

"Roger that, Anderson," Symonds answered her. "Just got off the comm with them a few minutes ago. Apparently, the units that were supposed to be coming our way have been diverted. Seems the violence affecting Sector 12 looked to be in danger of spilling over into other Sectors. Central Control pulled all available units back to the edge of the sector to hold the line. There is some good news though, Control says tac-teams will be sent to our location via H-Wagon along with a team of Exorcists. They're still trying to assemble the extra manpower, but Control says they should be with us inside half an hour."

"Half an hour?" Anderson shook her head. "I seem to remember hearing promises like that before. I don't suppose they also told you the cheque was in the mail?"

"The cheque?" There was a pause for a moment on the other end of the line as Symonds floundered for understanding. "I don't think I get you."

"Never mind," she sighed. "It was a dumb joke anyway. I'm reporting level eight as swept and clear. Moving on to level nine next. In the meantime, get back on the line with Central Control and see if you can light a fire under them. Anderson out."

"Anderson," a voice called out behind her.

Whitby hurried towards her with another Judge trailing in his wake. "I heard you on the radio saying you were on this level," Whitby said. "I just cleared level twenty. Sector Chief Franklin is dead - looks like Grimes killed him. And guess who I found hiding behind a desk in one of the admin offices on my way down?"

He nodded towards the other Judge. It was Hass.

"I've already told you I wasn't 'hiding', Whitby." A muscle twitched almost imperceptibly on Hass's face. "For all I knew you could've been another psychotic Judge on a killing spree. I was in cover in case there was fire fight, that was all." He turned towards her. "Now, Anderson, Whitby tells me you've been directing operations here. I'm sure you've done a fine job, but I must insist you stand aside."

"Uh-huh." Anderson raised her eyebrows. Typical SJS, she thought. Some things never change. "And I'd be standing aside so you can take command, no doubt?"

"Naturally." Unconsciously, Hass ran his hand across the front of his uniform to smooth out the creases. "As the ranking SJS Judge present-"

"You'll be the first guy I come to if I find any Judges taking bribes or fixing parking tickets," Anderson cut him off. "But seeing as we're dealing with a hostile psychic entity, I'd say this is a Psi Division case. What about you, Whitby?"

"I'm with you," Whitby said beside her. "One hundred per cent."

"Looks like you're outvoted, Hass," Anderson said.

"Outvoted?" Hass was livid. "This is Mega-City One, Anderson, not some kind of damn democracy!" He jabbed a finger at Whitby. "You realise this man is under investigation? I could report you for this."

"You do that, Hass," Anderson waved the threat away. "Right now I want you to-"

"Anderson!" She heard Symonds over her radio, his voice breathless with excitement. "Grud, you'd better look at this. The streets on the east side of the Sector House... Oh, sweet drokk, I don't believe it."

Spurred on by the urgency in Symonds's tone, Anderson hurried to the nearest window with Hass and Whitby behind her. The streets of the sector were no longer deserted. A crowd had gathered and was moving towards the building.

"Holy drokking Grud," Whitby said hoarsely. "There must be *thousands* of them."

Even from this distance, Anderson could see that the members of the crowd wore the same glazed expressions as the crazies in the Sector House. Looking at them, she could see they were armed with an array of improvised and makeshift weapons: kitchen knives, screwdrivers, wrenches, crowbars, shuggy cues, lumps of plascrete, lengths of chain and pieces of broken-off chair and table legs. Seeing wisps of smoke rising from among the crowd, Anderson realised some of them were even carrying flaming torches. They looked for the world like some kind of re-enacted lynch mob from the Tri-D history-doc channels, and they were heading her way.

All in all, things did not look good.

"Anderson to all Judges." Even as she began to shout into her radio, she was already moving. "The Sector House is about to come under attack. Drop whatever you're doing and get down to the ground level foyer ASAP. And Symonds? Get on the line to Central Control again and tell them I don't care *what* their problems are, half-an-hour isn't good enough. I want those reinforcements here now. It looks like we're going to need them."

EIGHTEEN

CROWD CONTROL

"You all know the plan," Anderson said into her radio, keeping one eye on the approaching crowd as it crossed the plaza. "We hit them with Stumm gas first, then we take things from there. Whatever else happens, we have to delay them. If they get past us, it's all over. No matter what, we hold the line. You understand me? We hold the line."

There was no answer. Looking at the faces of the other Judges as they formed up beside her in a widely spaced line thirty metres outside the front entrance of the Sector House, Anderson could see that they had heard her. Underneath their helmets, their mouths were set with grim expressions of determination. She might only have a little over a dozen Judges to help her hold back an army of psychotics numbering in the thousands, but she had no doubt every one of them would do their duty. Fifteen years at the Academy, and the years they had spent since on the streets made all the difference. They were Judges, and that meant they were used to being outnumbered. Facing a dozen perps or a thousand, it was all the same. The entity could throw as many of its puppets against them as it liked these men and women would never run. They were defending their Sector House. They would hold the line until Anderson ordered them to retreat, they were dead, or hell itself came calling. Though, for all that, she found herself hoping it would not come to either of the last two options.

"Drokk, but there's a lot of them," Whitby said beside her, fixing a grenade-like Stumm round to the barrel of his Lawgiver. He smiled at her, his manner nervous but resolute. "Not wanting to seem like I'm a pessimist, Anderson, but I have to say it's been good working with you. Thought I should say that now. You know, just in case."

"Yeah," she said. "I know what you mean. It's been good working with you too, Whitby." She smiled back at him. "You know, just in case."

The crowd picked up pace as it drew nearer. She could see dozens of individual faces: young and old, men and women, all united, all with the same unsettlingly blank-eyed gaze. It's like they're in a trance, she thought. Like the only thing they're aware of is the entity's voice in their heads. Ever since the crowd had begun its advance on the Sector House, it had been silent. Now, as though in response to some unheard signal, the members of

the mob let out a wordless animal shriek of rage as they broke into a sprint and charged towards the thin line of waiting Judges.

"Hold your fire," Anderson shouted into her radio. "Wait until I give the order."

The crowd charged in, two hundred metres, one hundred and ninety, one hundred and eighty...

"Get ready," she yelled. "Aim for just behind the front ranks. Ready!"

As they got closer the charge became a stampede. Faces that had been blank were now full of screaming hatred. One hundred and fifty metres, one hundred and twenty, one hundred. She gave the order.

"Fire!"

"The front doors of the Sector House," she had said earlier. "That's the weak point. That's where they'll attack and that's where we'll have to hold them off."

They had been standing inside the waiting area in front of check-in, watching through the Sector House doors at the crowd gathering in eerie silence on the other side of the plaza. Upon reaching ground level after having seen the approaching mob, Anderson had expected to have to fight them off immediately. Instead, as though the entity was being careful to bring together all its forces before the assault began in earnest, the crowd marching on the Sector House had paused in the plaza, waiting while its numbers swelled as smaller groups emerged from down the side streets to join the main force.

"What about the ground floor windows?" Whitby said. "Aren't they weak points as well?"

"No. Sector House 12 may be old, but it's designed to ward off an assault all the same. The windows are all triple-layered, reinforced plexiplast. They'd need major artillery to even dent them. No, the front entrance is our only problem. And even then, we may be able to bring down the blast shutters."

"No go on that score," Symonds grimaced. "I tried it the second I saw the crowd approaching. The door controls for the blast shutters are all fused. The EM surge that caused the last power cut must have burned them out. That's not the only bad news. I think we might have a problem with the rest of the building's electrical systems as well. After Tierney checked Custody Command, I accessed the surveillance logs for the cameras in the holding

pens area. Looks like the electronic door locks down there opened on their own, releasing all the perps. That's why there was such a bloodbath. If you ask me, I don't think any of it was accidental. I think this entity - whatever it is - can not only cut off the Sector House's power whenever it likes, but by using EM pulses it can even control some of the simpler systems."

"All right then," Anderson said. "As far as I can tell, our only option is to barricade the front doors and try to hold them off for as long as we can. Then we-"

"This is madness," Hass said. "There's no way we'll be able to hold them off until reinforcements arrive. We should just grab an H-Wagon and fly the hell out of here."

"Guess you haven't been listening, Hass," Anderson said. "The Landing Bay's been gutted and all the H-Wagons are out of commission."

"Then let's break into the vehicle garage," Hass said anxiously. "We get ourselves a Pat-Wagon and just plough through them. We can't just stay here. It's suicide!" Seeing the others staring at him, he got self-conscious. "Don't try and tell me the rest of you haven't been thinking exactly the same thing," he said. "I can't be the only person who realises defending this Sector House is a lost cause."

"The vehicle garage is a no go, either," Symonds said quietly while the others Judges shifted uneasily, refusing to look Hass in the eye. "I had Tek-Judge Woods check it out. The controls for the blast shutters are fused there same as they are here - but there, the shutters are already down. It means the vehicle garage is locked up tighter than a drum." He looked at Anderson. "It's like the entity's done it all on purpose to cut off all our means of escape, before summoning an army of psychos. It's like it knew exactly what it was doing."

"Probably did," Anderson agreed. "Whatever the hell this thing is, nobody ever said it was stupid." She shrugged and looked at each Judge in turn. "It doesn't matter. I don't care how smart the entity thinks it is. We'll find a way to beat it. If this job's taught me nothing else, it's that no matter how bad things seem, there's always a solution to a problem. There's always a way out. We just have to find it."

For a moment there was silence, then Symonds had said, "Yeah, about that. I think maybe I've got an idea..."

"The Stumm's not holding them!" Whitby yelled. Through the haze of gas, she could see the rearward ranks of the crowd pushing through the gas

cloud, trampling underfoot those who were incapacitated by the Stumm.

"Switch to riot guns." She had to shout even louder now on her radio to be heard over the noise of the crowd. Looking around, Anderson saw the Judges holster their Lawgivers and grab the pump-action riot guns each of them were carrying over their shoulders. "Plastic rounds only. Fire!"

They opened up with their riot guns, firing soft-nosed plastic shells designed to subdue rioters without killing them. As the first salvo of shots reached their targets, Anderson saw a dozen members of the charging crowd fall, then another dozen as the Judges fired again, and another dozen. And another. Despite a fusillade of non-lethal rounds, the crowd kept coming. Eighty metres had become sixty. Sixty became fifty. Fifty became forty. Thirty-five. Thirty. Twenty-five.

"Riot foam," she yelled. "The rest of you cover the hoses and pick off anyone who gets missed by the foam."

At the order, four Judges broke away from the line - two teams of two - who grabbed the heavy hoses lying ready beside them. Aiming the hoses at the crowd, they opened the nozzles, each team unleashing a stream of foam at the nearest members of the crowd. It solidified to the consistency of plascrete on impact. With practiced efficiency, the two teams began to move their hoses in a wide arc, dousing the entire front rank of the crowd in the rapidly hardening foam and stopping them in their tracks. Soon, hundreds of would-be killers were caught in the riot foam, screaming impotently in rage while, beside them, those who had managed to evade the foam's grip were shot down by more plastic bullets fired by Anderson and the others. The crowd's charge faltered, and for a moment it seemed to Anderson that they were winning. Then, far sooner than she would have liked, the stream of foam from the hoses diminished and then died.

"That's the last of the riot foam," one of the Judges on hose duty shouted out. "The canisters are empty."

The main body of the crowd was already moving, climbing over those caught in the riot foam and trampling them underfoot as they had those who had fallen victim to the Stumm gas earlier. As the crowd surged forward, those at the front unleashed a sudden rain of missiles in the form of lumps of plascrete, metal debris and improvised firebombs. Most of them fell short, but Anderson saw a Judge fall to his knees as a piece of plascrete rebounded off his helmet. Even as the Judges fired their riot guns in response, Anderson could see the crowd was nearly on top of them. She saw

faces contorted in hate, the dull-eyed expressions among the crowd having given way to primal bloodlust as they drew closer to their prey and the entity guiding them grew closer to achieving its aims. A few more seconds and the closest elements of the mob would have reached melee range. A few more seconds and the Judges would be slaughtered.

"Pull back," Anderson yelled as a rock whistled past her head. "Pull back inside the Sector House." Firing a Stun-Shot from her Lawgiver to down the rock thrower as he charged towards her, Anderson pressed the transmit button on her radio and shouted out a terse message. "Symonds, if that idea of yours is going to work, it'd better work now!"

"We could use an electro-cordon," Symonds had said as they stood in the waiting area, watching the crowd grow outside. "At most we'd only need maybe three or four emitter units to cover the front entrance - and we can get them from the Armoury. Then, as long as the cordon stays on, there's no way the mob will be able to get through it into the Sector House."

"I thought you said we couldn't trust the Sector House's electrical systems?" Anderson asked. "That the entity can cut the power supply whenever it wants?"

"Yeah." Symonds nodded. "There is that, but I've got a way around it." For a moment he had paused, and fell deep in thought. Then, realising the others were looking at him intently, he began again. "You remember I was assigned to track down the source of the power cuts? I never managed to pinpoint the actual source, but I think I found a way to beat it. The Sector House has *six* generators - four main ones and two backups - plus, we can tap into the city's main power grid. Three distinct power supplies, essentially.

"If we were to shut down all other systems, a single generator supplies more than enough power to run an electro-cordon indefinitely - meaning we'd have seven different power sources we could use. If we set the cordon to switch between each power source at micro-second intervals, I don't think the entity will be able to keep up. By the time it sends an EMP to knock out generator A, the cordon will already have switched to generator B. Then when it tries to knock out B, the cordon will have switched to C, and so on. At the same time, because the cordon's switching every micro-second, there'll be no noticeable reduction in the cordon's power - or at least not to anyone who's trying to breach it. Of course, we don't know what kind

of creature this entity is, and we don't know what it's capable of." He shrugged. "All the same, I think it would work. Probably."

"Probably?" Anderson turned her attention to the crowd gathering outside and sensed a growing feeling of expectation among them. There was something in the air; soon they would attack. She turned back to Symonds. "All right, I'm guessing 'probably' is as good as we're going to get. How long will it take you to set all this up?"

"If I have another Tek-Judge to help me, maybe fifteen to twenty minutes."

"Uh-huh. No pressure, Symonds, but you've got ten. From the looks of things outside, I'd say that's just about all the time we've got left."

"Symonds," Anderson yelled. They had pulled back to just outside the Sector House entrance, their backs against the doors as they fired plastic rounds to try to keep the crowd from getting closer. Five metres ahead, between the Judges and the onrushing mob, were the electro-cordon emitters - six metre-tall vertical metal poles studded with drum-like capacitor coils all the way along their length and spread out at ten-metre intervals. The forward elements of the crowd were already beginning to step between the emitters. In another half-a-second, activating the electro-cordon would be pointless.

"Symonds, It's now or never. I hope to Grud you're ready!"

"Just making the last connections. Make sure you're standing well back. I'm activating the electro-cordon now."

With a hum of power and the smell of ozone the emitters burst abruptly into life, creating a crackling cordon of electricity that sent the members of the crowd standing between them spasming backwards in pain. Anderson held her breath, expecting the emitters to spark and die at any second, but the voltage kept coming. No matter how many times the enraged crazies on the other side of the emitters threw themselves at the cordon, they were catapulted backwards, unconscious but unharmed. The plan had worked. Trapped on the other side of the high-voltage cordon, the mob could only scream in impotent fury and throw missiles at them.

"All right," she said. She looked at her colleagues. A few had cuts and bruises where they had been hit by rocks, but for the most part they had survived intact. The hail of missiles coming from the crowd hemmed in on the other side of the electro-cordon was growing by the minute. "Let's get

back inside the Sector House. Could be they'll quieten down once they can't see us anymore."

"How long do you think the cordon will hold them?" Whitby said as they went back into the Sector House. He stepped closer to her and whispered, "You have to figure it's only a matter of time before the entity decides to stop throwing them directly at the cordon and get them to target the emitters instead."

"Yeah," she said. "I guess we're going to find out just how smart this thing really is." She looked back at the crowd, at dozens of shrieking and rage-filled faces. She shrugged. "Either way, at least we've bought ourselves some breathing space. If the cavalry can get here in time, we might just survive this."

NINETEEN

A WHISPER NO MORE

"We go in hard and heavy," the Judge commanding the tac-team said, his voice raised to make himself heard above the roar of the H-Wagon's engines as he stood in the passenger compartment addressing the assembled Judges. "Latest intel has the Sector House under siege by a crowd of hostiles. Our job is to re-establish order and secure the scene, then let the Exorcists go in to do their work."

He nodded toward the squad of four Judges sitting at the back of the H-Wagon, away from the others. Exorcist Judge Damon Merrin was no longer listening. Like his colleagues beside him, he sat in quiet contemplation, attempting to steel himself for the confrontation ahead. Before taking his place in the H-Wagon, he had checked and re-checked his equipment. Psi-focus, holy water, silver-tipped shells for his Lawgiver: he had everything with him he would need to do his work. Now it was time to see to the most potent weapon in his arsenal. His *mind*.

This is going to be a bad one, Exorcist Judge Karras communicated telepathically from the seat opposite him. Karras's eyes were closed, his crucifix-shaped psi-focus gripped tightly in his hands as he used his psi-talents to scan ahead of them. *I can sense Anderson's mind, but there's something in the psi-flux blocking me from getting through to her. It's like there's a shadow lying over the entire Sector.*

Push harder, Merrin told him. Karras had the strongest psi-talent in the squad. If anyone could get through to Anderson, he could. *We need to know what we're up against*. Merrin could see into the minds of the other Exorcists and knew they were all experiencing the same disquiet. They could sense the presence of the shadow blanketing the sector below. Whatever kind of entity it was they were dealing with, its power had grown to truly terrifying proportions. *Use your psi-focus, Karras. You have to break through.*

I'm trying. Even through the mind-link Karras's telepathic voice sounded strained, as though he was pushing with everything he had. His mind-voice became anxious. *Wait, the entity knows we're here. Holy Grud, I think it's in the H-Wagon with us.*

Karras's eyes snapped open, joining the eyes of the other Exorcists as they nervously scanned the confines of the H-Wagon around them in search of the intruder. Merrin saw it first: a small patch of shadow flitting among the Judges as the entity tried to find a receptive mind. It leapt from Judge to Judge inside the H-Wagon, eventually coming to rest on the shoulders of the Judge giving the tac-team briefing.

"H-Wagons Five and Six will lay down a cloud of Stumm gas first to clear the plaza," the tac-team leader said. "The rest of us will..."

His words trailed away to nothing as his eyes glazed over. Merrin and the other Exorcists were on their feet in an instant and desperately running toward him, but it was too late. The tac-team leader had already pulled his Widowmaker from the strap on his shoulder. He clicked off the safety as he levelled the gun at the Judges in front of him.

"Sinners." As the bullets hit Merrin, the last thing he heard was the tac-leader's voice, calm and determined above the sound of gunfire. "You're all sinners. You must be judged."

"Look!" Standing beside the doors of the Sector House as the mob threw themselves against the electro-cordon, Judge Hass called out and pointed a finger up at the sky. "It's the reinforcements. We're saved!"

Rushing with the others to join him, Anderson saw the SJS Judge was right. In the distance, speeding over the rooftops of the blocks on the other side of the plaza, she could see a flotilla of six H-Wagons skimming the rooftops towards them. Finally Central Control had come through on their promises to send reinforcements. The Judges rejoiced, cheering and laughing with relief, but even as the flotilla drew closer, Anderson felt a tingling sensation at the back of her scalp and experienced a foreboding premonition.

"Wait." Standing next to her, Symonds was the first to see it clearly. "Something's wrong. The lead H-Wagon is breaking formation."

It began with a visible wobble in the flight of the first H-Wagon as though, inside it, the pilot was struggling for control. Then the entire flotilla broke formation. Anderson saw one of the H-Wagons explode without warning in a ball of fire and beside it, two more banked hard towards each other and collided. While the cheers from the Judges died as they watched the horrifying spectacle unfold, another H-Wagon turned its guns on one of its brothers, shooting it from the sky, only to be shot down by the remaining

H-Wagon which in turn exploded. Where there had been hope and the prospect of salvation, there was now only the sound of more screaming outside as great pieces of burning debris rained down from the sky to land on the crowd thronging the plaza. But that was as nothing to the horror Anderson felt as she spotted one of the H-Wagons falling flaming toward the plaza like a meteor.

Hitting the ground at tremendous speed it bounced once, then came skidding towards the Sector House - a great juddering piece of wreckage trailing a tail of smoke behind it, crushing everything in its path. The Judges dived for cover and Anderson found herself transfixed, her legs mysteriously paralysed, her eyes watching in appalled fascination as the H-Wagon slid inexorably towards her. She saw it plough through the electro-cordon, destroying the emitters. The Justice Department insignia on its side started to bubble and melt in the heat of the fire. She saw the nose of the H-Wagon come closer, closer. So close she could see the pilot sitting dead at the controls through the viewport, his lolling head jumping at every shudder running through the airframe as the H-Wagon slid across the ground. It was almost on top of her now. Her legs finally responding, she tried to leap out of the way as the H-Wagon hit the doorframe in front of her and came crashing through the front entrance. She heard the awful screech of twisting metal, she smelt the stench of burning oil and human flesh, she felt a sudden pain as something struck her head. For a moment, she could have sworn she heard the whispering voice of the entity laughing at her from the shadows.

Then, there was only darkness.

"Anderson!" She felt hands grabbing at her body, hauling her upright.

"Anderson!" The smell of smoke, the sound of shots being fired, answered by screams of rage and pain.

"Anderson!" She felt herself being pulled along, a strong arm around her side, her feet faltering and stumbling beneath her.

"Anderson!" She opened her eyes. Everything seemed strange and distant. She saw a dizzying kaleidoscope of images: the burning nose section of the H-Wagon sitting incongruously in the centre of the room amid a pile of debris, a cavernous hole in the Sector House wall behind it, a throng of citizens spilling through the hole, mad-eyed and screaming with bloodlust, their faces filled with hate. She saw a Judge trip and the crowd

closed around him, blood splatters rising in the air as dozens of clubs rose and fell in an awful rhythm. She tried to move to help him, but the arm around her restrained her. She caught glimpses of other Judges through the smoke and dust. Hass, Symonds, a Street Judge - Jurgens? They were firing their Lawgivers, shooting at the crowd, trying to hold back a tide of screeching psychotics.

"Anderson!"

Dully, she realised Whitby was shouting in her ear, with one arm around her waist, dragging her with him as he and the other Judges retreated behind the check-in desk. The last Judge through tried to slam the door closed between check-in and the waiting area, but the weight of the crowd pushing against it from the other side made it impossible. The retreat continued, the Judges pulling back into the corridor behind check-in as the crowd spilled through the door towards them.

"Anderson!" His arm still around her, Whitby was shaking her.

"Grud, Whitby, I hear you." She put a hand to her scalp and saw blood staining her fingers as she pulled it away. "Anybody ever tell you that you shouldn't shake a concussion victim?"

"I had to try something." He fired a salvo of shots at the crowd, cutting three of them down. "We're out of ammo for the riot guns. We're using execution rounds just to hold them back. I hope to Grud you've got some ideas."

"The foyer," she said, pushing free of his arm to walk unaided. Her ears were ringing and her head felt like a dinosaur had stamped on it, but she started to come back to her senses. "Head for the elevators."

They followed her lead, fighting a retreat through the corridors as the crowd pushed hard on their heels. Then, as she stepped into the wide expanses of the foyer and saw the elevators before her, Anderson pulled her Lawgiver from her boot holster.

"Rapid fire," she said. "Hi-ex!"

She fired six shots, two for each of the three elevators, blowing them apart. Behind her, as the ringing in her ears diminished, she heard Whitby gasp.

"Anderson, have you gone crazy?"

"We can't let the psychos use the elevators," she said as she ran, hoping the others were still following her. "Head for the emergency stairwell. That's our escape route."

Sprinting across to the other side of the foyer, she grabbed the stairwell door and pulled it open. Then, as the other Judges caught up and hurried inside, she turned to the crowd and fired Standard Execution rounds. The situation had developed past the stage where she could afford to worry about using lethal force. It was bullets or nothing, kill or be killed.

"Move it," she shouted. Seeing the last of the Judges were now on the stairwell, she abandoned the foyer and ran up the steps after them. Her hands scrabbled at her utility belt, pulling out more hi-ex shells and reloading her Lawgiver. "Head for level one."

The others had reached the landing for the floor above. The last one up, Anderson looked down at the crowd surging up the cramped confines of the stairs after them. You've got no choice, Cass, she told herself. If you don't stop them, they'll rip us to pieces.

She fired again, more hi-ex, aiming for the roof above the crowd and causing it to collapse in an avalanche of rubble. Pushed back choking as the dust from the collapse enveloped her, Anderson saw that the hi-ex had done its work. The stairwell was clogged with rubble - a solid wall of debris separated them from the mob on the other side. She had created a breathing space and could only hope it lasted longer than the last one.

"You blew out the elevators so the psychos couldn't use them, then brought down the stairwell to stop them from following us," Whitby said. "Sorry if it seemed I was doubting you before, Anderson. The only thing you're crazy like is a fox."

"Only problem is we're cut off up here," she said. She saw Whitby and the others standing on the landing, staring at her strangely. "What is it? You're looking at me like I'm having a bad hair day and everybody's too embarrassed to say anything."

"Your left eye, Anderson," Symonds said after a moment. Seeing her raise her fingers toward her face, he reached out to stop her. "No. I wouldn't touch it."

"Okay. Seeing as there doesn't look to be any mirrors around here, somebody want to tell me how bad it is?" she said.

"Bad," Symonds said. "The eye's swelled up and red like it's filling with blood. I'm no Med-Judge but it looks like..." He paused again, the bad tidings dying on his lips.

"An eight-ball haemorrhage," she finished the sentence for him. She put her hand down by her side, fighting the urge to probe at her face. "It's all

right, Symonds - I know what it means. I've got blood leaking into my eye socket, probably from a brain haemorrhage. Must have been hit by a piece of debris when the H-Wagon crashed through the front doors." She shrugged and immediately regretted it as she felt a stabbing pain in her head. "Guess that explains the headache."

"I still got some med-supplies left." The owlish Acc-Judge she had seen earlier pushed towards her with a medi-pack in his hands. *Thorley*. She remembered his name. Somehow, she found herself surprised he was still alive. "I could put a dressing on it."

"No." She put her hand up to stop him. "No offence, Thorley, but I'd rather wait until I find somebody who knows what they're doing."

"Wait," Whitby said, his head raised as though he was trying to hear something. "Listen. What's that sound?"

As the others fell quiet, Anderson heard it: a scratching noise coming from the other side of the wall of rubble blocking off the stairwell.

"It sounds like digging," Symonds's voice was a whisper. "The crazies are trying to dig their way toward us with their bare hands."

"Yeah, I wouldn't be surprised." She saw the faces of the other Judges looking at her. Anxious, nervous, looking to her for guidance. "We have to get ready. I want two men to go to the Armoury to stock up on more ammo, while the rest of us prepare to hold this landing. They'll get through that rubble eventually. When they do, we'll hold on here as long as we can, then retreat to the next landing above us. We'll fight floor-by-floor, collapsing the stairwell roof at each landing as we go, then only retreating when the crazies break through again. Hopefully that way we can buy some time while Justice Department decides how the hell they're going to deal with this mess." She shrugged again, not knowing whether she should be worried or relieved that the stabbing pain did not return. "It's not much of a plan, I know, but if anybody else has any bright ideas, I'm open to suggestions."

"I have a suggestion, psi-bitch." She heard Hass's voice behind her and felt the barrel of a Lawgiver press against the back of her neck. She had not even noticed the SJS Judge work his way behind her. "An *excellent* one, in fact. Why don't you die?"

For the second time that day, Whitby saved her. Lashing out with his Lawgiver, he caught Hass's arm with the barrel, causing Hass's gun to ride upwards as he pulled the trigger. Deafened by the blast as the bullet

whizzed past her scalp, Anderson turned in time to see Whitby and the others wrestle Hass to the ground and take his gun from him. She saw Hass struggling, biting and spitting at them as they held him down. Then she saw a Judge point his Lawgiver at Hass.

"No," she said, pushing the Judge to one side. "It's the entity. It's controlling him!" She looked down at Hass, and saw a shadow glaring out at her from behind his eyes. "And you're not just riding him like Jeffrey Queeg or any of your other simps, are you? This time you're in absolute control. Total psychic possession. You've jumped into Hass's body to possess him and try to kill me. Better luck next time."

Psi-bitch. She heard the entity's voice whispering from inside Hass's mind. *I will kill you.*

Yeah well, you've tried that one before. Contacting the creature telepathically, she goaded it. *A few times, in fact.* She heard the voices of Whitby and the others distantly, talking to her, but she ignored them. She concentrated her attention on Hass and the entity inside him. She let the real world fade away. She waited. She needed to push the creature a little more. *But you know, you made a mistake taking control of Hass to attack me yourself. Before, when I tried to scan the Sector House, I couldn't home in on you. By showing up here like this, you've given me a direct line right back to the source. It makes things easier.*

Psi-bitch! She saw the shadow inside Hass grow larger as the entity became angry. *I will destroy you!*

That's right, keep huffing and puffing like you're the big bad wolf. She smiled at it. *All I see is a frightened little shadow who's too scared to face me. If you ask me, you need to grow some. It's funny, I seem to remember hearing something about angels not having any genitals. Looks like the rumours are true.*

Psi-bitch! I will eat your soul! Furious now, it screamed.

She saw Hass's eyes grow black as a vast wave of darkness surged forward from them to engulf her. She heard the entity's voice whispering to her, its tone malignant and knowing, but she was ready for it. She did not raise her defences; instead she crafted her mind to a single hard point as sharp as a scalpel and pushed her way into the entity's mind as it flowed out to attack her. She felt an initial resistance, then, in an instant, she was inside it. She felt its mind moving in dark and malevolent ripples all around her, its thoughts as sick as tumours. She pushed on. Hard. Harder. Pushing her

way down into the centre of its substance, the creature's own psychic defences shredding before her in layers of thoughts and images as she moved her way even deeper into the heart of its mind. Deeper. Deeper. She was in a vast and darkling ocean. Alien territory. She was alone inside the mind of a creature that fed on human souls. She felt the entity gather its strength around her. Hungry, eager to consume her. Spurning thoughts of fear or safety, she pushed her way onward.

All right then. Deep now in the belly of the beast, she called out to it. *Here I am. Right where you wanted me. You wanted a fight, you bastard? You've got one.*

Come and get me.

TWENTY

IN THE BELLY OF THE BEAST

Darkness. It was all around her. She felt things moving in the darkness with her, brushing against her body. She heard a sound like the beating of dark wings. She heard a voice all around her, so loud it was like she was inside it.

Psi-bitch, the voice said. *You are mine now, psi-bitch. You are mine.*

She ignored it, concentrating on keeping her mind keen and sharp, a dagger into the heart of the beast. She felt it put up walls against her, barriers to slow her progress. She pushed on through them, tearing them aside, revealing the creature's secrets as, layer by layer, she fought her way through its psychic defences.

I am Uriel, she heard its voice once more in the darkness. *I am the flaming sword. The fire of Grud. I watch and I sit in judgement.*

She ignored it, refusing to be distracted. She ignored what it thought it was, the lies it told itself. She pushed harder and harder, her mind a razor stripping away bleeding layers of camouflage and falsehood. Then she saw it. She saw the secret, the truth of the beast hidden beneath its lies.

Psi-bitch! The voice screamed at her, its cries growing frantic and desperate as though it was afraid of what she might find. *Psi-bitch! Psi-bitch! Psi-*

Anderson, she corrected. *The name's Anderson. You know, I really think it's about time somebody taught you some manners.*

"Anderson," Whitby yelled. "Anderson!"

It was no good. Ever since they had disarmed Hass, Anderson had stood motionlessly staring at him while Hass stared back at her as though they were both in a trance. Meanwhile, the sound of digging from the other side of the rubble wall was growing louder.

"The rubble's moving." Tek-Judge Symonds pointed as a piece of debris dislodged itself of its own accord to fall towards the floor. "They'll break through in a second. Whitby?" Symonds looked towards him for guidance. "What do we do?"

"You heard the plan," Whitby told him. "We hold the landing as long as we can, then we pull back to the next floor, collapsing the stairwell behind

us." He turned to look at Anderson and Hass. "If Anderson hasn't snapped out of it by then, we'll just have to drag her up the stairs with us. Get ready all of you. On my mark."

He saw another piece of rubble fall away, revealing mad eyes staring from a dirt-encrusted face as the first of the crazies broke through the last layer of debris to emerge on their side of the stairwell.

"Fire!"

Darkness. She pushed against the barriers in the entity's mind and the darkness gave way to...

Light. She found herself standing in the kitchen of an unfamiliar apartment. She looked about and saw a mess of discarded wires and plasteen bottles lying on the table beside a stack of books. Inspecting them, she saw textbooks on chemistry and electronics, a handwritten notebook and a leather-bound religious text called The Testament of Jaron.

It is time, she heard a voice say behind her.

Turning, she saw the entity standing in the same shadow-form she had seen in Charles Whitman Block. Faceless, its body was made of swirling shadows with great dark wings upon its back.

I am Uriel, it said to her. *I am the sword that punishes transgression. It is time for you to be judged.*

No, I don't think so, she said. Even as the words formed in her mind, she saw the shadow mass shift uneasily as though it had expected a different reaction. She realised it wanted her to fear it.

Fat chance of that, she told it. *I know what you are now.*

I am Uriel, it said. *I am...*

The sword that something-something-something, she said. *The something that sits and something-something. I heard you the first time. Thing is, I've seen inside your head. I don't believe you.*

The shadow mass shifted again.

Look around you, she said. *These are your memories, the apartment, the kitchen table, the crappy décor. The books are a nice touch, by the way. The thing is, nobody prints textbooks any more - they're all on vid-slug, and never mind binding a book in leather. Guess you had some gaps in your memory and had to fill in some blanks.*

I am Uriel, the shadow-form said in a tone that sounded increasingly uncertain. *I am the angel of-*

Angel schmangel, she said. *You're forgetting I can see right inside your mind. You're Morris Arthur Weems, a religious zealot and one-time arsonist. Or at least that's what you think you are. This is his apartment we're standing in - or, to be more precise, it's what you think his apartment used to look like. We're standing right in the middle of your memories now. You don't believe me? Take another look around you.*

The scene changed, the apartment fading away around them and giving way to new surroundings. Now it was night and they were standing on a pedway as a crowd of ghost-like citizens milled past.

In case you're wondering, they can't see us, Anderson said as she indicated the flow of heedless citizens. *Have you ever seen that Tri-D movie about the old miser at Christmas who gets visited by three ghosts who came to show him the error of his ways? This is like that, though probably without the happy ending. We'll see. It looks like the show is about to begin.*

Anderson could see a man in a black trench coat running towards them with a Judge on a bike in hot pursuit as the crowd screamed silently and parted to let them pass. While Anderson felt the entity shift with uneasy remembrance, she saw the man in the trench coat turn to fire a gun over his shoulder at the pursuing Judge. The Judge fired back, the bullet hitting the fleeing perp and causing him to fall sprawling into a man with a satchel further down the pedway. As the satchel went flying and the perp fell to the ground, Anderson saw the Judge stop his bike and stride over to him. She caught a glimpse of the name on the Judge's badge as he passed by her. Brophy.

I died, the shadow-form said.

No, she said. *Morris Weems died. For you, it was all just beginning.*

Nearby, his body shaking as he lay on the plascrete, the perp was dying. Anderson could see his lips moving as though he was trying to talk. On the ground beside him, she saw a pool of black shadow appear and grow larger. It flowed towards the perp, covering him from head to toe, engulfing him, consuming him. From inside the darkness, Anderson heard a despairing wail as the perp gave out a last psychic scream, the sound of a man in torment.

I am Morris Weems, the shadow-form said.

Anderson saw the shadow-form's head was bowed. It looked as though it was grieving.

I am Morris Weems, it said again as though there was comfort in that thought.

No, Anderson said. *You're the thing that ate him. You are the darkness.*

There was nothing but screams, muzzle flashes and the smell of cordite. The rubble barrier was gone, pulled apart by the bleeding hands of the insane mob that charged up the stairwell at Whitby and the others who stood on the landing. The Judges fired again and again, bodies falling before them to be trampled and dragged back out of the way by their fellows in their eagerness to get to the Judges and kill them. Whitby shot down another madman, but where one fell there was always another, and another, and another to take his place. It was only a matter of time before the Judges were overwhelmed.

"We have to pull back," Symonds yelled. "The drokkers are right on top of us!"

It screamed. The shadow-form did not take bad news well. It screamed, a mouth forming in the shapeless mask of its face. It turned towards Anderson, anger flaring darkly among the shadow substance of its body.

I am Morris Weems, it roared, as though daring her to deny it.

Anderson shook her head, sweeping out an arm to indicate the landscape around them.

No, you're not, she said. *Look around you if you don't believe me.*

The scene had changed again. At first sight, they looked to be inside a shadowy, dark-walled cavern. The walls shifted as tentacles writhed wetly and emerged from inside. Like the ancient folktale of the man swallowed by a whale, they were inside the belly of some great and all-consuming creature. It was made of the same black, shifting shadow-substance as the figure beside her that called itself Morris Weems. Anderson saw thick ropy tentacles slither from the walls towards her as though the creature had detected her presence. She sensed its appetite; it was hungry and eager to feed on her.

This is what you are, she said. *This thing around us. I think it's some kind of other-dimensional predator, existing partially out of phase with the world. You know, all this time I was having so much trouble trying to find it inside the Sector House and I've just realised why. It is just so drokking big. I thought it was inside the Sector House, when all the time the Sector House*

was inside it. When I was looking for it, it was like I was trying to spot an elephant while I was inside the elephant's stomach.

She saw the Weems shadow-form looking at her, confusion imprinted over the blank features of its face.

Never mind, she said. *I was just thinking aloud. All you need to know is it's some kind of predator and it eats human souls, and it was Morris Weems's bad luck to be its first victim.*

I am Morris Weems, the shadow-form said.

No, she insisted. *Morris Weems is dead. This creature - you - killed him. Then it used him to give it the one thing it lacked: consciousness. Before it absorbed Morris Weems's soul, it was little more than the sum of its appetites. It was mindless, a hunger without direction. When it killed Weems, it created a template based on his personality to guide it and do its thinking. A template, that's all you are.*

No, the shadow-form said shrilly. *I am Morris Weems.*

You feel it all the time, she said. *Don't you? The hunger. That's the entity - the real you - pushing you along to do what it wants. It uses you to plan and scheme for it, to make its hunting easier. What else are you there for?*

I am Morris Weems, the voice grew even shriller. *I punish sinners. I have a holy mission; the cycle must be completed.*

Ah yes, she said. *The cycle. I was wondering when you'd get to that.*

Raising a psychic barrier to ward off the entity's tentacles, Anderson advanced to the nearest wall and pointed at something within it. Visible beneath its surface were half-a-dozen irregularly shaped, fist-sized globules. She could see dark shapes moving inside them.

Congratulations, she told the shadow-form. *It looks like you're going to be a daddy. Those are eggs, and the ugly-looking things mewling inside them are your offspring. That's what all this was about, right from the beginning. You helped the entity steal souls, and it used that energy to self-fertilise and create a brood of little monsters just like it. A life cycle, that was the cycle that had to be completed.*

No, the shadow-form roared. *You are wrong. I am Morris Weems! I-*

No you're not, Anderson said. *You're a bad recording of a copy of the ghost of a dead man trapped forever in the belly of the beast that killed him. And thanks to you, the evil little mothers in those eggs are going to spread out across the city and make more poor dumb bastard recordings just like you. Then, when they have their own template, they're going to start feeding*

on souls to make even more monsters like them. And when they and their offspring have sucked the Big Meg dry, they'll go on to the rest of the world. They'll feed on the whole human race, and it will be all your fault. You wanted to punish sin? You wanted to sit in judgement?

She let the words hang in the air, hoping she had played her hand right. She spoke again, spitting the words at the shadow-form with venom.

Judge yourself.

No! The shadow-form screamed. Its hands warping into angry claws, it lashed out at the wall before it, burrowing deep inside it and crushing one of the eggs. She heard another scream, louder, a deep rumbling bass tone to the shadow-form's shrill falsetto. Around her, the tentacles writhed and the walls shook as the entity reacted in rage and pain. She took a step back, watching as the shadow-form gouged great chunks out of the wall. The tentacles whipped towards it, coiled around it, tried to restrain it, but the shadow-form broke free. It ripped the tentacles loose from their moorings and resumed its attack on the wall, tearing chunks of shadow-substance free as both it and the entity around it screamed again and again. She felt the entire mass of the entity convulse, great wet fissures appearing in the walls. The creature was at war with itself. It was tearing itself apart. More tentacles lashed out to grab hold of the body of the shadow-form and rip it to pieces with a final anguished shriek, but it was too late. The damage was done. She felt the entity diminish around her. It was dying.

In fear and terror, it returned to the only haven it had left.

"I don't believe it," Whitby said. Looking down the stairwell, he saw no sign of movement. A minute ago, dozens of crazies had been charging up the stairwell, intent on killing them, only for every one of them to collapse without warning. Gingerly, he bent forward to check the pulse of one of the collapsed bodies. "They're unconscious. What the hell happened?"

"It's over," he heard a woman's voice behind him.

It was Anderson. Whitby saw that she had emerged from her trance seemingly little the worse for wear.

"Anderson?" He rushed over to her. "Grud, for a moment there I thought the entity had you." He pointed a thumb over his shoulder at the collapsed crowd behind him. "I'm guessing you're responsible for this? How the hell did you do it?"

"It was nothing much." She shrugged and smiled. "You remember I said the entity fed on souls? Let's just say I found a way to give him indigestion."

TWENTY-ONE

THE SMALLEST THING

"That should about hold it until we can get you to a med-bay." Two painkilling injections and an emergency course of viral healers later, the Med-Judge fixed a magnabind dressing over her left eye. "We should be able to save the sight in your eye, but I'm still worried about that head trauma."

"First chance I get, med-bay's where I'm headed to, doc," she said. "Before that, I've got some things I need to get done."

"If you say so," the Med-Judge shrugged. "I want to be clear, though, it's against medical advice."

"Whatever you say, doc," she smiled. "I promise that if I drop dead I'll have nobody to blame but myself."

She was sitting on a stretcher in the ground floor foyer. An hour had passed since she had emerged from inside the entity's mind, and now the entire Sector House was swarming with a dozen different brands of reinforcement Judges sent by Justice Department to re-establish order in the wake of the crisis. In the last hour, in-between receiving medical attention and saying her goodbyes to Symonds and most of the surviving Judges from the stairwell, she had been questioned and de-briefed by half-a-dozen different interested parties. Psi Division, Tek Division, SJS, the MegCentral Regional Commander: everybody wanted to hear her version of what had happened. No doubt in the next few days she would be called upon to tell the story to a dozen different commanders in a dozen different places, to have the entire incident chewed over and analysed while her own actions were put under a microscope. She expected as much. No matter how bad a crisis was, the paperwork she had to go through when it was over was always worse.

"Sinners, we are all sinners. We must be judged..." she heard a man's voice muttering quietly nearby, repeating the same phrases like a mantra. "Sinners, we are all sinners. We must be judged..."

Anderson saw a Judge in a straitjacket being wheeled through the lobby on a stretcher. It was Hass. The SJS man was now a psych-case. As he passed, Hass didn't even notice her. His eyes stared blankly into space,

drool dripping from his mouth as he quietly repeated the same words over and over again.

"They're taking him to the psycho-cubes for observation," the Med-Judge said. "Whatever happened to him, it seems to have left lasting mental scars."

"Psychic possession can do that to you," Anderson said. She shrugged. "Give him some time and he should be okay. Although you may want to make sure you keep him away from matches for the time being."

"Hey, Anderson," she heard a voice call, and saw Whitby jogging towards her as the Med-Judge moved on to treat another patient. "I thought I'd missed you. I just wanted to say goodbye." He looked with concern at the bandage across her face. "How's the eye?"

"It's fine," she said. "Although I'm sure I'll have to put up with people telling me I look like a pirate for the next few weeks."

"Yeah," Whitby said. "I think if you had a robo-parrot and a peg leg to go with that eye-patch, your costume might look better."

"A Street Judge making jokes?" she smiled. "Now I've heard everything. You might want to be careful - before you know it you'll be smiling on duty and giving Street Division a bad name."

"I'll take the chance," he smiled back. "I guess you'll be leaving us soon?"

"That's right." From across the foyer she saw a pair of Psi-Judges walking towards her, one of them carrying a heavy metal box. "I've got some unfinished business to attend to, then it's back to Omar House for yet more de-briefings. You know how it is."

"I know," Whitby nodded. "I guess I'm likely to be doing more of the same myself." He paused, then began awkwardly again. "Before you go though, I just wanted to say-"

"We said it already," she decided to spare him any further embarrassment. Smiling was one thing, but expecting a Street Judge to easily express his emotions more than once a day was like asking for a miracle. "Back when we were about to take on the mob of crazies. 'Just in case.' You remember?"

"I remember. Though that was before you beat the entity and saved my life."

"I seem to remember you saved mine, too," she told him. "Twice. We're even."

Standing up from the stretcher, she nodded towards the approaching Psi-Judges.

"Anyway, I've got to go. Like I say, unfinished business. See you around." She began to walk away, then turned. "Oh, and Whitby? Remember when we were in Billy Friedkin Block and you were wondering whether you measured up as a Judge? I hope you'll forgive me, but I overheard it. It's the curse of the telepath - sometimes you pick up stray thoughts without even trying. I've seen you work, and you can take it from a 'legend', you measure up just fine."

"Basement sub-level three," Psi-Judge Carsons looked at the floor number stencilled on the wall of the stairwell and turned her attention to the palm-sized comp-terminal in her hand. "According to the Sector House specs, the evidence vault should be this way."

Anderson opened the stairwell door and stepped into the corridor with the two Psi-Judges beside her. They walked towards the imposing steel door of the evidence vault at the other end of the corridor, their footsteps echoing across the floor.

"Teks say all systems are back online," Carsons said, producing an override card from inside her utility belt and swiping it through the lock. The door slid open. "Looks like we're in business."

They stepped through the door, the lights automatically flashing on overhead as they did so. Anderson saw row after row of metal shelves filled with plasteen crates.

"They must have been packing everything up, getting ready for the move," Psi-Judge Sirk said. Spotting a clear space on a nearby table, he deposited the metal box he was carrying on top of it. "Grud, but that thing's heavy."

"It should be," Carsons said. "It's layered with psi-brick."

"All right," Anderson said. "It doesn't look like there's any particular order to these crates, so we'll have to do this the hard way and check them all until we find the one we're looking for. Carsons, you have the details?"

"Check." Carsons raised her palm-sized again and looked at the screen. "We're looking for property recovered following the arrest of one Jard Erwin Kelso for Receiving Stolen Property. Grud, according to this, the stuff was seized fifteen years ago. If nobody claimed it, it should have all been sold off a long time ago."

"It's here," Anderson said. "I can feel it."

"How does something like that even end up in a Sector House to begin with?" Sirk said as they began to search through the crates. "From the reports I heard back at HQ, I understand it's some kind of other-dimensional predator."

"That's right," Anderson said. "When I was in its mind, I caught glimpses of its past. Enough to piece at least some of the story together. Hundreds of thousands of years ago someone captured it."

"Someone?" Carsons said. "You mean like aliens?"

"I think so. Whoever they were, they captured it in its larval stage and put it in a prison. I don't know whether they meant to study it, put it in a zoo, or keep it as a pet. Whatever their plans were, something went wrong. There was a malfunction and the ship carrying the entity exploded. Still inside its prison, it was cast adrift in space until it fell to Earth."

"Like a meteor you mean?" Carsons shivered. "I always said nothing good ever came from space."

"That still doesn't explain how it ended up in the Sector House," Sirk said.

"It must have been buried by the impact." The look in Anderson's eyes was distant. "Eventually, somebody dug it up by accident and thought it was valuable. Who knows how many hands it must have passed through over the centuries, or how many collectors had it in their possession, never once realising what it really was. And all that time, the entity waited, raging against the walls of its prison. It waited for the right set of circumstances, for the tangents to come together that would allow it to be free. Jard Kelso. Brophy. Morris Weems. Even then, once it had absorbed its first soul - Weems - and was hungry for more, it found itself frustrated. There was no one around for it to kill, to make it grow stronger. It was hidden away here inside the evidence vault, probably until the packing for the impeding change of Sector House caused it to be moved a little bit closer to the holding-cubes. Close enough for it to start killing in earnest."

"I've found it!" Carsons said excitedly.

Stepping alongside her as Carsons pulled open the crate, Anderson saw a tray of gemstones, each in individual evidence bags. Among the glittering stones, she saw it: a blood-red ruby, no bigger than her thumbnail. There was no mistaking it. Even from here, she could feel the entity's cold malevolence radiating to her from inside.

"That's it?" Carsons seemed disappointed as Anderson picked up the ruby. "A small thing like that caused all this damage? I thought you said this entity was bigger than the Sector House."

"It was," Anderson said. "It *is*. It's from another dimension - it doesn't follow the same physical laws that we do. Once I turned the Uriel-Weems part of it against itself, the entity retreated back inside the gemstone. Over the years this ruby has become more than just a prison. It's a haven, a refuge. More than that, it's an anchor that keeps it in our dimension - where its prey is. That's why it didn't want to see the Sector House destroyed."

She put the ruby in the metal box and watched as Sirk closed and locked it.

"All right," she said. "Take it back to Psi Division and tell them it's an Omega Level Threat. Have them put it in the psi-proof vaults below Psi-lab and tell them to throw away the key. That way, hopefully, it will never have the chance to harm anyone again.

"What about you?" Sirk asked as he hefted the weight of the box and turned to make his way from the evidence vault alongside Carsons.

"I'll be along," she told them.

They left her, their footsteps echoing up the corridor. She was exhausted, not just by her exertions over the last day and night, but by the experience of having the entity's memories play through her mind again. It had existed only to feed on human souls, annihilating them. Although she was sure such moral questions would be lost to it, it occurred to her that the entity was as close to a creature of pure evil as anything she had ever met. A small thing, Carsons had called it - and she was right. Anderson realised that there was no irony in the fact that such a seemingly insignificant thing had caused so much devastation, and had even come close to wiping out the entire human race. It was the way of the universe. Their lives were lines and tangents; fragile threads that intersected while around them other forces moved unseen in the darkness to shape their existence. Forces that mankind called gods, fate, destiny, good luck, bad luck and a dozen other names besides. No matter the name though, it was all the same. The forces moved about their work regardless, unravelling the skein of one human life thread here, cutting another one there. Heedless and uncaring, the dance of the cosmos continued as human lives floundered and were broken by the smallest things.

Sometimes, it was the small things that made the difference between life and death.

THE END

Mitchel Scanlon is a full time writer residing in the valleys of Derbyshire. His first break was with the Black Library's *Warhammer Monthly* comic and the character Hellbrandt Grimm. He has since penned the adventures of the assassin Liliana Falcone and the ruthless vampire Helmar von Carstein for *Warhammer Monthly* and several short stories for *Inferno!* as well as superhero tales for the UK market. His first novel was *Fifteen Hours* for the Black Library.